

Comment: The Devil of Perversity

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Will the new coalition government in Skopje be able to marginalise the extremists threatening to plunge the country into bloody conflict?

Last week, Macedonia's parliament rejected calls for a state of war to be declared. Instead, a new, broader coalition government of national unity came into being.

It is excellent news, especially as radicals - both Macedonian and Albanian - have been pushing for Skopje to formally go to war against Albanian fighters.

George Robertson, NATO secretary general, recently described the situation in the country in dramatic terms. "Macedonia is on the edge of an abyss!" he said.

The writer Edgar Allan Poe once recommended to his readers that they avoid approaching the edge of any abyss. The fear provoked by the looming depths becomes hypnotic, he wrote, and mesmerises the unwary until temptation overcomes sense and the unfortunate individual steps over the edge. Poe labelled this temptation "The devil of perversity".

Macedonian political leaders, in government and opposition, have long played fast and loose with this devil.

It all began with a clandestine "gentleman's agreement" to pursue private political and commercial interests through gradual and controlled manipulation of ethnic tensions between the two main ethnic groups - Macedonians and Albanians. The strategy paid great dividends.

It's no secret that some of the leading lights in the former ruling coalition - the Macedonian VMRO and the Albanian DPA - are among the richest individuals in the country.

But it was a dangerous strategy - as the recent fighting has illustrated. And now, after two months of clashes between security forces and Albanian armed groups in the mountains near the border with Kosovo, Macedonia has stumbled towards the edge of the abyss - or to give it its correct name, civil war.

All last week, parliamentary debates were dominated by calls from Macedonian politicians for a state of war to be declared. Albanian deputies strongly opposed the move. So too did the international community.

Those in favour believe a state of war would significantly enhance the efficiency of the military operation against the Albanian insurgency. Now that their demands have been rejected, they complain a crucial opportunity has been missed.

Hawks, the extremists on the Macedonian side believe the chance has gone to resolve the "Albanian issue" once and for all - by burning Albanian villages and forcing people to leave their homes.

Albanian extremists too are disappointed, believing a state of war would help them to secure their goal -

an independent territory for Albanians.

But overwhelming military action would only increase the risk of terrible, uncontrollable violence. Further polarisation of the two communities would become inevitable.

The space for political dialogue would be dramatically narrowed for both sides. The possibility of a serious crisis, with key parties leaving the coalition, would increase.

Macedonia would also risk being discredited internationally should accusations of human rights violations surface, even if such claims proved to be untrue.

The pitfalls of declaring a state of war outweigh the benefits. Such a declaration would be akin to an amputation - a rapid and relatively easy surgical procedure, but one leaving the patient seriously debilitated.

The only solution still open to saving inter-ethnic cooperation rests with the new coalition government. It must demonstrate that it truly represents the republic's interests. Macedonian politicians need to unite, and be seen to be defending all the country's citizens, not just Macedonians.

Albanian politicians, meanwhile, need to distance themselves from any violence and explicitly condemn it no matter what the motive. Secondly, they must commit to the continued stability and integrity of the state, and to make clear that the only acceptable means for resolving their community's problems is through Macedonia's legal institutions.

Should the authorities remain divided, especially along ethnic lines, they will be incapable of guaranteeing security.

Extremists on both sides believe the decision not to declare a state of war is a setback. But perched as we are on the edge of an abyss, it is better and wiser to step backwards not forwards. Macedonia's political leaders have played too long with the devil of perversity, with civil war.

Many things have been destroyed in the process, many others seriously damaged. It remains to be seen whether the new coalition can marginalise the extremists. If it doesn't, it is only a matter of time before calls for a state of war will reverberate around parliament once again.

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