

Croatian 'Coup' Foiled

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Croatian generals are sacked after being accused of plotting to topple the government.

President Stipe Mesic has claimed an open letter by 12 army generals criticising the government's crackdown on alleged Croatian war criminals was part of preparations for a military coup.

Speaking in Orahovica on September 29, the day he announced the sacking of seven of the 12 signatories still on active service, Mesic said he believed the letter was published to test the water ahead of a possible coup.

"That's exactly it," Mesic said. "That's why I reacted so swiftly. It was the only possible decision and I made it without any hesitation."

On September 28, the 12 generals published a letter calling upon "competent state officials and institutions... and the media to resist engaging in negative and historically unfounded representation of the Homeland War."

The letter outlined six areas of dissatisfaction with the Croatian government's line on the war fought against Belgrade in the early 1990s. The declaration also demanded that only those who fought in the 'Homeland War' should be appointed to top positions in the Croatian military.

Mesic, who was in Strasbourg when the letter appeared, said the 12 signatories are connected to that part of the Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ, which has never accepted defeat in last year's parliamentary and presidential elections.

The president said he had acted so decisively because the letter had come against a backdrop of right wing protests over the recent arrests of alleged Croatian war criminals. Various war veterans' associations, linked to the HDZ, have lost considerable privileges since the new government came to power - providing ammunition for rabble-rousing extreme nationalists.

Mesic claimed the nationwide demonstrations are organised by the self-styled "Headquarters for the Defence and Dignity of the Homeland War". He said they have grown since his government's decision to arrest retired general Tihomir Oreskovic, suspected of war crimes against Croatian Serbs in Gospic.

In early September, 12 war crimes suspects named by The Hague tribunal, including heroes of the 'Homeland War', were arrested. And in recent months the Croatian media has published numerous reports on military involvement in atrocities against Serbian civilians.

The prospect of further arrests and the government's crack-down on military privileges has only added to the rage of the far right and allied war veterans' associations.

At least two of the twelve signatories to the letter - generals Ante Gotovina and Mirko Norac - have been mentioned publicly as possible Hague suspects for alleged crimes committed during army operations against Serb rebels in 1995.

Although Mesic's swift decision neutralised any possible threat from the generals, it plunged the Croatian political scene into crisis.

The president had failed to consult defence minister Jozo Rados. His party, the Croatian Social-Liberal Party, HSL, which has marked nationalist tendencies, is prime minister Ivica Racan's strongest partner in the six-party coalition government.

Mesic's snub fueled speculation that the defence minister would resign. While Racan and the four other coalition partners backed the president's action, the HSL, including party president Drazen Budisa, initially refused to comment.

A defence ministry spokesman described the sackings as "drastic", although the remark was apparently made without consulting Rados.

In response Mesic said, "those who want to be in politics, but are in the army, should leave the army. As a result of my decision I have enabled those generals to get involved in what they are interested in."

The HDZ leapt upon the appearance of cracks within the ruling coalition. On September 30, the party published an open letter to "Croats at home and abroad" calling for early elections.

A full 24 hours after Mesic's decision to sack the seven generals, Budisa finally declared the president's decision legitimate and constitutional. Rados said Mesic had conceded with hindsight that "it would have been better" to consult the defence minister, but insisted he would not be resigning.

Budisa, however, did temper his support for Mesic saying the generals had been attacked without any reason and had been the victims of a hostile media campaign for months.

The HDZ continues to exercise a strong hold over the army and police - the powerbase of the late president Franjo Tudjman. HDZ supporters, including the 12 generals, were appointed to key positions and many remain in office.

Mesic aims to depoliticise the Croatian army and to establish a professional and politically independent institution. But the military's involvement in crime and corruption, and the powerful vested interests such activity has engendered, presents the president with serious obstacles.

According to a poll in the Zagreb daily Jutarnji list, 66 per cent of Croats support Mesic's decision to sack the generals. As one Zagreb resident said, the president's action showed the government "was finally tackling previously untouchable areas."

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