

Before The Deluge: Agani's Last Interview

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"An agreement will mean the end of all the Serbs' pretensions and illusions in Kosovo. But Albanians will only accept Yugoslav sovereignty if NATO really comes."

Two weeks before the start of the NATO bombing campaign, Pristina was on a knife-edge. The Albanians were about to sign the Rambouillet accord, and it was clear that all attention would swing towards Belgrade's response - and the NATO threat.

At moments, it was possible to believe that the Albanians' long struggle to end their repression had been achieved: the monitoring mission of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe was staffing up, with ambitious plans for civil development, and Albanians, enjoying unprecedented international attention, were flushed with confidence. But at other moments, the imminence of disaster was palpable: in the increasing reports of violence and troop movements, the night shooting in the capital, and a feeling that something had to give.

In his favoured spot, at the back of a rooftop cafe in the centre of Pristina, Professor Fehmi Agani - Ibrahim Rugova's deputy in the Democratic League of Kosovo and a member of the Rambouillet negotiating delegation - gave what would be one of his last interviews, to IWPR Executive Director Anthony Borden. With his shock white hair and a well-pressed suit, speaking in halting but clear English, he assessed the possibilities and the risks of the new period of violence.

IWPR: PR: Are you optimistic that there will be a positive solution in the coming weeks?

Agani: There are not enough grounds for optimism, but we cannot allow ourselves to be pessimists.

IWPR: What are the problems in the Rambouillet agreement?

Agani: For the Serbs, the problem is that the agreement will mean the end of all of their pretensions and illusions in Kosovo. They still want Kosovo within Serbia, even though it is no longer really the case and 2 million people do not want it. Many people in Serbia today cannot understand this. But tomorrow many more will. It is very difficult for Serbia to accept, but it will be more difficult to refuse. That is our hope. For the Albanians, the difficulty is to accept the integrity and sovereignty of Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia will also have many important powers. And Serbia is present in the constitution. This symbolic recognition is very important, because our intention is independence. We feel there is no future in Serbia or Yugoslavia.

So we would have to accept that for a time we were in Yugoslavia. But if people were sure that NATO really would come, they would be ready to accept.

IWPR: What will the Western role be?

Agani: The agreement is a kind of protectorate, and the only real chance is if there is international power, a NATO force. [Yugoslav President Slobodan] Milosevic says that Serbia and its institutions provide a sufficient framework for implementing the agreement. But without NATO, it will be impossible, because who else will divide the two armies? Who else can impose peace?

IWPR: The possibility remains that, for the first time in many years of hardship, Pristina could soon be a radically different place.

Agani: Before, especially from 1974-90, we had a good life. Albanians were dominant, because they were in Yugoslavia but only nominally in Serbia. They enjoyed substantial autonomy. Kosovo participated in the federation in the same way as the republics. It had a parliament, constitution, supreme court, constitutional court, and financial independence. The main body was the presidency, and Kosovo was represented there with one person, like Serbia or Croatia. In the parliament, Albanians had the right of veto, so nothing could be decided without them. Kosovo was a kind of stable state. Now, the situation here is quite abnormal. In education, for example, we have schools, throughout Kosovo, which are totally empty. The Albanians want classrooms, but they are not allowed to enter. We have even asked the Serbs to allow Albanians in for afternoon shifts, but they refuse. Can you imagine? Sports stadiums, too, are reserved for Serbs. Can anyone understand such an irrational policy? In Pristina you may not feel the discrimination as much because 70 per cent of the population or more is Albanian and they live their way of life. But in the administration or the police, all you see are Serbs. So we have an effective occupation, and we cannot be in Serbia anymore. If the agreement is accepted, this kind of situation in Kosovo should become much, much better.

IWPR: But everyone, even the United States, opposes independence.

Agani: This is understandable, for now. But nobody has the right or reason to oppose our independence.

IWPR: They are afraid of regional instability, Macedonia, the changing of borders . . .

Agani: But it would not be changing of borders. In Yugoslavia, Kosovo was a constituent element, with a defined border. That Yugoslavia doesn't exist anymore. And as with the others states--Croatia, Bosnia, Slovenia Macedonia - Kosovo should have the right to decide its own status. Our movement is not secessionist. We simply say we do not accept Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia now is a new state, and it is not our state. It is only Yugoslavia by name. In reality, this new state is Serbia.

IWPR: But if there is a hope for change, the reason is the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), not the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK).

Agani: I don't think so. The real defeat of Serbia was a political defeat, and this was achieved by the LDK. It was not enough, but the KLA emerged at a time when Serbia had already become a strange presence in Kosovo. The ground was prepared for them. So there is a link between the LDK and the KLA periods.

IWPR: What was the political defeat? What was the Albanians' "victory"?

Agani: Serbia cannot mobilise Albanians into its army. It cannot bring us into its wars. It cannot make a census. Serbia has been reduced in Kosovo to the police and army and force. Politically, it has been totally isolated in Kosovo, and has no support in any stratum of Albanian society.

IWPR: And now, is this the KLA period?

Agani: In a way, yes. But for a short time. The problem will not be resolved through the KLA, although it has to participate. But the other elements in society, especially the LDK, will also play a role. For example, the LDK has created a system of relatively independent institutions, such as the schools, which will be essential.

IWPR: But young Albanians are radicalised. They say that the LDK failed, and its pacifist strategy was mistaken. Violence has been successful.

Agani: Yes, but the theory has to be tested. You have to compare the goals and what has been achieved. We have more than 2,000 killed, 5,000 injured and more than 50,000 refugees. For a period, we had 400,000 internally displaced. We have 40,000 houses burned. This is a big cost. And it has been mainly paid for by ordinary people: human rights organisations say that 95 per cent of the Albanians killed were civilians and only 5 per cent from the KLA. So I don't want to minimise the result of the KLA. But I am against the euphoria.

IWPR: What, then, is next?

Agani: The protectorate. If we achieve agreement, we will have real institutions, and real politics. If there is no agreement, it is impossible to say--either staying in Serbia or war, and neither is acceptable. But we have the Yugoslav Army, and 20,000 people in the KLA. Without an agreement, sooner or later war is unavoidable.

Location: Macedonia

Serbia

Kosovo

Croatia

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