

Djindjic Allies Call for Poll Boycott

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Serbia's prime minister is banking on a low turnout for upcoming presidential ballot to cling on to power.

Serbian premier Zoran Djindjic's only hope of staving off early parliamentary elections and probable defeat is if voters boycott the second round of the presidential contest this Sunday in such numbers that it is declared invalid.

But this is only likely to buy the premier a limited amount of time, as there are signs that his increasingly disenchanted political allies may start defecting to his main rival, the Yugoslav president, Vojislav Kostunica, making an early parliamentary ballot inevitable.

The second round of the Serbian presidential election pits Kostunica against the reform-minded economist Miroljub Labus who's backed by Djindjic. In the first round on September 29, Kostunica and Labus, a member of the respected non-governmental think-tank G17, won 30.9 and 27.4 per cent of the votes respectively.

The October 13 poll could be declared null and void if, as is feared, less than half the electorate turns out to vote.

More than fifty per cent of voters must participate in an election for it to be considered lawful. Turnout in the first round was 55.5 per cent and there are suggestions that it could be up to 15 per cent lower in the second round.

If no president is elected, the Serbian parliament speaker Natasa Micic, a Djindjic ally, will fill the post temporarily, which means that the premier - who also has a majority in parliament after expelling deputies belonging to Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia - will be in effective control of all the republic's institutions.

Kostunica and Djindjic have long been in conflict over the distribution of power. The former wants to force early parliamentary elections in which it is thought his party will win a significant share of seats and thus be able to influence appointments to a new government. The latter is desperately trying to avoid elections fearing he will lose power.

But even if Djindjic staves off a ballot, he could be undone by disenchanted members of his ruling Democratic Party of Serbia, DOS, coalition who may join Kostunica's rival alliance and support his demand for an early poll. Many in DOS are known to be unhappy with Djindjic's growing monopoly on power and feel they could have more influence in a Kostunica government, as parties currently allied to the Yugoslav president lack political experience and expertise.

DOS members Nebojsa Covic, Dragoljub Micunovic and Miodrag Isakov, leaders of the Democratic Alternative, the Democratic Center and the Vojvodina Reformists respectively, have already broken ranks and backed Kostunica's bid for the Serbian presidency.

An unexpected rift has also opened up between Labus and Djindjic since the first round of the presidential election. Labus told the daily Blic on October 3 that Kostunica's deputies should have their seats returned to them in the assembly and early parliamentary ballot called - exactly what Djindjic did not want to hear. "The worst thing for Serbia is not to have a president," he said. "We have to avoid this, regardless of who

wins."

Observers suspect Labus realises he cannot beat Kostunica and may well be thinking in terms of some kind of future alliance with him. This would suit the latter, as his team lacks reformist economic experts. There are even suggestions that Labus might be offered the prime ministerial post in a future government loyal to Kostunica.

For his part, the Yugoslav leader has markedly softened the tone of his recent utterances about his presidential rival. Two days after the first round, he said that Serbia "needs" men like Labus. As Ognjen Pribicevic, a political analyst, observed, "This rapprochement is a clear sign that something is changing. It cannot be ruled out that Labus might be made premier of Serbia."

Instead of attacking each other, as they did in the first round, Kostunica and Labus are now both trying to convince the voters to take part in the second round. Their approach increasingly contrasts with Djindjic, who, while not advocating a boycott of the poll, suggested it would "not be horrible" if it was declared invalid.

His ally, Vladan Batic, justice minister and head of the Christian Democratic Party of Serbia, was more outspoken. In an interview with Blic last Friday, he called on voters to boycott the ballot.

While such an outcome would certainly suit Djindjic now, it is hard to imagine that he can postpone parliamentary elections for much longer.

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