

Future Bleak for Minority Parties

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Ethnic minorities could lose ground won since Milosevic's ousting, should their parties fail to win parliamentary seats.

Ethnic minorities in Serbia stand to lose out from the expected poor performance of the parties that represent them in the forthcoming parliamentary election, analysts say.

And, long term, its thought, they are likely to feel increasingly disenfranchised by a voting system that they see as weighted against them.

The problem is especially great in southern Serbia, where Albanians account for a large proportion of the population and memories of recent conflict are still alive.

Minorities including Albanians, Hungarians and Roma account for 17 per cent of Serbia's 7.5 million population. Although they are represented in the mainstream political parties, many support those representing their own specific groups.

In the years since Slobodan Milosevic was deposed as Yugoslav president in 2000, minorities have been rewarded for their part in overthrowing him, so that their representation in local- and national-level institutions is reasonably proportional to their numbers.

But these gains could be put in jeopardy by the threshold set for the December 28 election, which means a party will only be given seats in parliament if it gets more than five per cent of the vote. This is likely to present an insurmountable hurdle for all the minority parties and leave them with few or no representatives at national level.

Three Albanian parties in the southern municipalities of Presevo, Bujanovac and Medvedja, adjacent to the border with Kosovo, are boycotting this month's vote - just as they shunned the last round of elections in 2000 - in protest at the failure to introduce positive discrimination to help ethnic minority groups get seats in parliament.

A senior official in the Party of Democratic Progress, Orhan Rexhepi, for instance, said his party would be prepared to take part if Albanians were guaranteed two or three seats in the Serbian parliament, in the same way that Serbs have seats earmarked for them in Kosovo and Croatia. However, no such offer was forthcoming.

The boycott is seen by many in Belgrade as confirmation that the Albanians have no interest in participating in Serbian state institutions, preferring to dream of secession for their corner of the country.

But the demand for some kind of favoured status for minorities is not confined to the Albanians alone.

Various minority parties have been pushing for new legislation which would protect the rights of Serbia's various ethnic groups. Such a law would either reduce the threshold that minority parties need to pass in order to win seats in parliament, or else award them a quota of places in the legislature.

Dusan Janjic, coordinator of the Ethnic Relations Forum, believes that the boycott by the Albanian parties could have been avoided if the right legislation had been put in place.

The Serbian government - however grateful it may have been initially for the support of minority political groupings - has not taken up the idea of changing the law to favour smaller parties over larger ones.

Janjic thinks the various minority parties are partly to blame themselves because - factionalised at the best of times - they failed to unite on this important issue.

Elsewhere, non-Albanian ethnic parties are attempting to achieve the five per cent target by grouping together in coalitions.

The alliance with the best chance of getting into parliament is Together for Tolerance, which consists of several parties representing Hungarians and Croats in Vojvodina, Muslims in Sandzak, Bulgarians in eastern Serbia, and Roma throughout the country - as well as two other groups with no particular ethnic affiliation.

But even this grouping has shown itself vulnerable to conflict. One of its members, the Alliance of Vojvodina Hungarians, SVM - the biggest party representing this ethnic group - is engaged in a fierce row with five other Hungarian parties which have opted not to join the coalition.

This kind of internecine strife reduces further the likelihood that minority parties or groupings will come out of the election with any seats in parliament.

Janjic believes that a scenario where these parties end up playing a reduced role would not necessarily be a bad thing. He told IWPR that the ethnically specific parties do not have a God-given claim to represent their communities.

But other observers are more concerned about the impact the election could have, given the still fragile nature of Serbia's democracy and the deep suspicions that many communities still harbour about central government.

Nenad Canak, who heads the League of Vojvodina Social Democrats, a party which does not target voters from any one ethnic group, believes minorities could lose out if they have to rely on the mainstream political parties to channel their concerns.

He argues that when politicians from a minority group are elected via such a party, they inevitably have to promote its political manifesto - even if this goes against the interests of their own ethnic community.

Many of the bigger parties - even some of the Serbian nationalist ones - have prominent minority politicians among their number. But there are suspicions that in some cases, this is mere tokenism designed to drum up votes from a particular community on election day, and then forget about them later.

The minister for national minorities of Serbia and Montenegro, Rasim Ljajic - who is also a leader of the Together for Tolerance alliance - has said that these mainstream parties see minorities simply as a "voting machine".

Serbia's recent history - the Kosovo conflict in particular and Milosevic's hostility to non-Serb groups in general - leaves many ethnic community members with an acute sense of how they are represented, and how that translates into a real political voice.

With their "own" parties likely to perform poorly in the election, and representation through the major parties offering them only a limited voice, many ordinary people are concerned at where this leaves them.

Pavel Domonji, a Slovak from Stara Pazova, fears that the concerns of ethnic groups will be heard in public less often, and that as a result less effort will be made to resolve them.

"This could lead subsequently lead to a loss of confidence in these [minority] parties, and the melting away of their members, because people do not like to engage where they cannot do anything to improve things for themselves," he said.

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