

## **Kosovo Albanian Prisoner Protest**

**Author:** [Nehat Islami](#)

Albanian protests over jailed compatriots end without any sign of progress

Kosovo Albanians have been left bitter and disappointed after mass demonstrations failed to bring about the release of their compatriots from Serbian jails.

The lack of international media attention and support from leading local politicians only added to the sense of disillusionment.

For two weeks, tens of thousands gathered in downtown Pristina to lend their support to the prisoners' relatives.

But there is no sign the estimated 800 detainees will be released before the introduction of an amnesty law in Serbia, expected in December.

The organisers of the demonstrations, mostly mothers of imprisoned men and boys, said the protests would resume if the prisoners were not freed.

The women hoped the scale of the demonstrations would pressure the international community into forcing Belgrade to free their relatives.

The prisoner release issue is unresolved because it was overlooked in the Kumanova agreement signed with Slobodan Milosevic at the end of the Kosovo war.

Yugoslavia was accepted back into the United Nations and Organisation for the Security and Co-operation in Europe without the prisoners being mentioned, a move which outraged the demonstrators.

The organisers of the demonstrations only agreed to call off the protests after receiving guarantees from UNMIK chief Bernard Kouchner that pressure on Belgrade would increase. Last week, he raised the prisoner issue during an address to the UN Security Council but seemingly to no avail.

Women like Tefide Haxhiavdyli from Gjakove, whose three sons disappeared last April, are in despair.

"Where are our sons? Kouchner find our sons!" Tefide shouted. "UN, why did you accept that criminal state [Yugoslavia]?" Her anger was echoed by the Dana family from the same village still hoping for word on eight missing relatives.

"Our children are not criminals," said one weeping woman. "They have not killed anyone. They are political prisoners, prisoners of war. That's why they should be freed at once."

When Slobodan Milosevic was ousted in early October, Kosovars hoped the new Yugoslav government would move to release the detainees.

But, apart from the high profile pardon granted to human rights activist and poet Flora Brovina, jailed in 1999 for 12 years on terrorism charges, hundreds remain behind bars with no clear idea of what charges they face.

In the year since the Kosovo war ended, some 1,300 Albanian prisoners have been released. According to the Belgrade based Humanitarian Law Centre, many of them gained their freedom only after relatives paid police, lawyers and judges "fees" of between 10,000 and 100,000 German marks.

The Pristina demonstrations began after prisoners rioted in several Serbian jails. Relatives of the Kosovo Albanian detainees were concerned they could be targeted during the unrest. In fact, there were no reports of any Albanian inmates being injured or threatened.

The protestors carried photographs of their imprisoned and missing relatives. Many cling to the hope the International Red Cross might yet provide some answers, but virtually all faith in UNMIK and the international community has been shattered.

Kosovo Albanian politicians have hardly showered themselves in glory either. Initially politicians were reluctant to lend their support to the protests.

But when the scale of the demonstrations grew and people began travelling to Pristina from across Kosovo, several politicians from small political parties changed tack and appeared on the podium to deliver fiery speeches. One could almost sense the start of the long campaign ahead of next spring's general elections.

But neither Ibrahim Rugova, leader of the Democratic League of Kosovo and victor in the October poll, nor his closest rival Hashim Thaci, leader of the Democratic Party of Kosovo, showed their faces.

The blatant exploitation of the event by several minor politicians coupled with the absence of Rugova and Thaci, left many demonstrators disillusioned with their political representatives.

The prisoners' relatives received most support from ordinary Pristina residents. Besides joining the daily rallies in the thousands, people brought food, blankets and words of comfort.

Since 1981, when the first anti-Serbian protests began in Kosovo, some 15,000 Kosovo Albanians have been imprisoned by the Yugoslav authorities - almost one in two families have been affected.

"Why do I take part in this protest?" said a university professor walking alongside his students. "To do my bit to end this last Serbian inflicted misfortune."

Nehat Islami is an independent analyst in Kosovo.

**Location:** [Serbia](#)  
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