

Kosovo Waits For The Vote

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The international community remains dogged by the question of when to hold

By Blerim Shala in Pristina (BCR No. 96, 26-Nov-99)

The international community faces some difficult months ahead as it

wrestles with the problems surrounding the organisation and probable

outcome of democratic elections in Kosovo.

In Bosnia-Herzegovina, the international community, under the auspices of

the Dayton peace accords, rushed the vote, ensuring that the nationalist

parties responsible for the war in the first place were legitimised in

power. Despite some shifts, the fundamental problem remains, ensuring that

the international civil and military protectorate will remain in place for

many years.

In Kosovo, Carl Bildt, UN special envoy to the Balkans and former High

Representative in Bosnia, has suggested elections be held by 2001. Bernard

Kouchner, head of the international administration, said in September that

local elections should be held in spring 2000, paving the way for general

elections later.

Two big problems need to be resolved prior to any vote - technical problems

with political repercussions, and political problems with technical repercussions.

The technical problems are connected to the registration and provision of identity documents. Last spring, when hundreds of thousands of Kosovo Albanians were forcibly driven out of the province, Serb forces sequestered and destroyed their documents.

The registration process will cost approximately 16 million dollars and will take at least five months to complete. But before it can begin, a decision must be taken as to the criteria for claiming Kosovo citizenship: place of birth, long-term residency or parentage.

There is also the question of the voting rights of emigrants - some 500,000 Kosovo Albanians have left the region since 1990 to seek asylum all over Europe and an estimated 100,000 Kosovo Serbs have left the province in the last two years.

The difficulties in resolving these issues make the spring 2000 target for elections appear unrealistic.

The second big problem is political. Bernard Kouchner's proposal, which appears to enjoy the backing of most of the relevant international organisations, envisages local elections taking place before general

elections.

The rationale for this proposal stems from the fear that Kosovo has no experience of democratic elections and it would therefore be prudent to experiment at the local level first. Furthermore, according to UN Security Council Resolution 1244, executive power at the central level is vested with the UN Administration, headed by Kouchner, while at the local level, local people should be empowered through elections.

But perhaps the most persuasive argument for holding local elections first, at least from the point of view of the international community, is the well-founded fear that a duly elected and internationally recognised Kosovo parliament would promptly proclaim complete independence, without even calling for a referendum on the issue.

It is no secret that the vast majority of Kosovo Albanians want independence. The Kosovo people voted for independence in the 1991 referendum. But it is understood that international acceptance is essential if the final goal of an independent state is to be realised.

Unilateral declarations of independence are not the best political solution and any Kosovo parliament would need to seek international recognition for

the peoples' demands for independence.

It is in the joint interest of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK)

and the Kosovo people that democratic structures - at local and national

level - be established as soon as possible. In this respect, to call

elections at national and local levels at different times would not,

perhaps, be the best solution.

This could prove divisive: electing people only at the local level could

create a situation whereby local officials, backed by an electoral mandate,

are confronting appointees at the national level.

Cooperation between central and local government in this case could prove

very difficult, especially as central government controls decision-making

on vital issues, such as budgets, security, police and public services. It

is by no means clear how local government will coordinate with the

international administration on such issues.

Finally, it is crucial that elections in Kosovo take place only after the

reconstruction process is well under way. Only then will political activity

take on a more positive role, dedicated to the reconstruction of the

country, and allow for a peaceful and constructive election process.

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