

Kostunica Claims Victory

Author: IWPR

Serbian opposition supporters have been celebrating after claiming an historic election victory in Yugoslav presidential elections

Almost no one slept in Belgrade on Sunday night as opposition supporters sensing electoral victory over Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic took to the streets in their thousands.

According to unofficial results from the opposition, Vojislav Kostunica has a strong lead with half the 7.4 million votes counted, and now has a serious chance of a first-round electoral victory.

The Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS, says Kostunica has 55 per cent of the vote - 21 per cent more than Milosevic.

"According to our data for the presidential elections, victory in the first round is certain," Kostunica said early on Monday.

The regime, however, claims it is leading the opposition. The ruling Socialist Party of Serbia says Milosevic has 47 per cent of the vote - 4 per cent more than Kostunica.

At least 20,000 opposition supporters took to Belgrade's streets last night in an atmosphere of high excitement. Many assembled outside the DOS headquarters to await the results. Others gathered on street corners to share information gleaned over their mobile phones. The B2-92 website was put out of action by the sheer number of visitors.

The government, meanwhile, organised a rally in Belgrade's central Trg Republike square. Singers and entertainers from the pro-regime Radio Television Serbia performed at a hastily arranged concert.

A cordon of riot police was deployed at around 10 pm to keep opposition supporters and those attending the Milosevic rally apart. Dozens of plain clothes police officers, given away by their ill-concealed radios, patrolled the square.

But it soon became apparent that large police presence would be unnecessary. Only around 100 regime supporters sporting flags of the governing coalition partner the United Yugoslav Left turned up for the concert.

Budimir, a disappointed pensioner from the Belgrade suburb Galenika, said he was told he was coming to celebrate Milosevic's victory.

"They organised a bus and told us that there would be around one hundred thousand of us. See this, only a handful of people - what a shame," he said.

One young opposition supporter got close enough to Serbian Sports Minister Dragoljub Kocovic, an organiser of the pro-regime rally, to swear in his face. The minister's bodyguards grappled with him, but he

managed to get away.

Opposition supporters skirted the police cordon through the back streets and gathered to boo the performers.

Chants of "Red bandits" and "Save Serbia, kill yourself Slobodan" greeted Sinisa Vucinic, leader of one of Milosevic's satellite parties, when he visited the square at around midnight. The concert finished a short time later.

According to unofficial sources, Radical Party leader Vojislav Seselj, a former Milosevic ally, was the first to announce Kostunica's lead. At around 11.30 pm Seselj reportedly said to party officials at his headquarters, "Milosevic is finished".

The atmosphere at the SPS electoral committee offices was very solemn, in stark contrast to the euphoria in the DOS camp.

SPS spokesman Nikola Sainovic said at around 10.45 pm that Milosevic had triumphed in Kosovo and could have secured enough votes to win outright in the first round.

Half an hour later JUL spokesman Ivan Markovic said the president had an even better lead over Kostunica than the SPS were reporting and that the DOS candidate had failed to secure a single vote in some Kosovo municipalities.

DOS, meanwhile, has dismissed the Kosovo results, saying that despite the high turnout, numbers were too low to affect the overall result.

"The main task was to prevent the manipulation of Albanian votes and give the Serbs a chance to vote for whoever they want," said DOS spokesman Milan Savic.

DOS election observers reported polling stations in ethnic Albanian areas as virtually deserted, Savic said.

Sainovic left the SPS offices surrounded by security guards shortly after Markovic's comments. Rumours coming from SPS headquarters suggested Sainovic and the party committee were in emergency meetings with Milosevic to decide their next move.

At around 1 am, just as voter turn-out and first results were expected from the army and police, the Federal Electoral Committee, FEC, stopped work. No explanation was given. Radical Party, DOS and Serbian Renewal Movement representatives immediately protested against the decision, but were removed from the building by police.

"No counting is in progress. They are sitting and waiting for something. We don't have a single preliminary result," DOS representative Sinisa Nikolic said. The FEC, he said, claimed all ballots were locked and secure.

"The Federal Electoral Committee's behaviour is illegal," said Belgrade lawyer Srdjan Radovanovic, "because its work must not be interrupted until the counting is over."

Just as the FEC shut down operations all results pointing to Kostunica's victory were removed from SPS website and replaced with those announced by Sainovic.

Opposition politicians now suspect Milosevic has opted to forge the result to enable a second round run-off against Kostunica. A candidate needs to secure a minimum 50 per cent of the vote to win outright in the first round.

"I hope the government has understood the message from its citizens," said Zoran Djindjic, leader of the opposition Democratic Party. "If I was in Milosevic's shoes I would not prolong the people's ordeal for further 14 days," a reference to the date set aside for any second-round contest.

"Milosevic will only be able proclaim victory in 14 days if he kills Kostunica," said one enthusiastic DOS leader.

Opposition analysts anticipate the SPS, JUL and Montenegrin Socialist Peoples' Party, led by Milosevic loyalist Momir Bulatovic, plan to form a coalition in the federal parliament. The analysts also predict Milosevic will concede defeat in the local elections.

Although it is too early to analyse the results, Milosevic's apparent defeat can perhaps be explained by the extraordinarily high turnout. Marko Blagojevic, director of the non-governmental Centre for Free Elections and Democracy, CeSID, believes it to be the highest ever in Yugoslav elections.

CeSID estimates around 75 per cent of the electorate voted, while the opposition put the figure at 80 per cent. The SPS meanwhile estimate only 55 per cent voted.

In Montenegro, by contrast, turnout was very low. Less than 30 per cent cast their vote, an encouraging sign for Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic, who called for an election boycott over controversial constitutional changes pushed through by Milosevic just ahead of the ballot.

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