

Kostunica Keeps Kosovars Guessing

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The fall Slobodan Milosevic and his hated regime has thrust the thorny issue of Kosovo's future to the fore.

Kosovo Albanians have little reason to rejoice over the defeat of Slobodan Milosevic.

Some politicians and other leading figures in the province regard his successor, Vojislav Kostunica, to be more of a nationalist than the deposed Yugoslav leader.

The infamous photograph of the new federal president holding a Kalashnikov automatic rifle surrounded by Serb paramilitaries in Kosovo in 1998 has been published in several Albanian newspapers and is a cause of great concern.

Although Kostunica did not rush to make any strong declarations over Kosovo, it was evident in his brief statements that he considers the province to be a part of Serbia.

But most Albanians find a return to Belgrade rule unimaginable. They say ties with their former masters were permanently severed last year when Serb police and troops withdrew from the province.

Initial Albanian hostility to Kostunica's victory diminished when he said he would respect UN Resolution 1244 - an international ruling many Kosovars perceive as possibly helping to pave the way for an independent state.

According to the resolution, Kosovo is part of Yugoslavia and not Serbia. Kostunica has said that Yugoslavia virtually ceased to exist when the old federation was dissolved in 1991.

A lot depends on the path that Montenegro takes. If it becomes independent, then there is no reason why Kosovo should not follow the same course.

As the elections draw near, Albanian political leaders have repeatedly said that there can be no compromise on the eventual goal of independence.

They envisage the path to independence as beginning with the October 28 local elections, which will be followed by the drawing up and adoption of a new constitution and then parliamentary elections - to be held sometime in the spring. A new government would then call a referendum to decide Kosovo's future.

The local poll will allow for the creation of a new cadre of administrators and leaders who will run the region and gradually take over from UNMIK.

International officials have accepted Albanian demands for a temporary constitution for the province. But the OSCE ambassador in Kosovo, Daan Everts, has said it should be drawn up with Belgrade - something Albanians will not accept.

There is also the problem of what to do with the Kosovo Serbs. Even moderate Serb leaders in the province are closely linked to Belgrade and refuse to acknowledge they belong to Kosovo.

Despite the fact that Albanian politicians have made it clear in their electoral campaigns that they see the Kosovo Serbs as citizens of the province and want them to feel secure, the minority community has boycotted the voter registration process.

Widespread anti-Serb violence following the departure of Yugoslav forces last year has forced an estimated 200,000 Kosovo Serbs to flee their homes either to Serbia or to enclaves heavily guarded by K-For troops. The vast majority have yet to venture back to their homes.

There is also the question of the division of state-owned factories and mineral resources in Kosovo, which are claimed by both Serbia and the Kosovo Albanians.

Serbia wants to divide Kosovo in the town of Mitrovica and take control of all of northern Kosovo, which is rich in minerals and industry, in exchange for southern Serbia, or eastern Kosovo, which includes the valley of Presevo, Medvegje and Bujanovc. But this idea is unacceptable to Albanians, who say they are ready to fight to keep this land.

Finally there is the complicated issue of the estimated 900 Albanian prisoners of war who are being held in Serbian prisons. Albanians are unhappy that the West lifted many sanctions imposed on the former Yugoslavia without first resolving the POW issue.

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