

Macedonia: Albanian Parties Form United Front

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After months of silence, Macedonia's Albanian parties have backed calls by the country's former guerrilla leader Ali Ahmeti to form a united front

While Macedonian parties show increasing signs of fragmentation, parties representing the country's large Albanian minority are merging into a single political bloc, aimed at both advancing their interests and promoting democracy in the country.

Moves to establish a coordination team for the merger were made public last week by the former leader of the disbanded National Liberation Army, NLA, Ali Ahmeti.

The coordination team is to comprise two members each from the Party for Democratic Prosperity, PDP, the Democratic Party of the Albanians, DPA, and the National Democratic Party, NDP, and three from the former NLA. The discussion about possible candidates is currently under way.

PDP leader, Imer Imeri, said the new leadership would be made up of people "who have proven themselves and who will inspire confidence among the people".

The new bloc, which is expected to call itself the Democratic Alliance - Integration Movement, is to hold its first working session at the end of the month. There, component parties will formally cease their separate activities and draw up a set of common goals.

The secretary-general of the NDP, Xhevat Ademi, said the coordination council would not concern itself with trifling party business but with big national issues. The council's mandate will coincide with the duration of the next parliament. It will contest the next elections - the date of which is still unclear. The latest guess is that they may be held in May.

The broad goals of the Albanian alliance are to strengthen Albanian interests in the country by preserving last August's internationally-brokered Ohrid peace deal and supporting moves to democratise society.

The hope is that this will improve the Albanians' image at home and abroad, lead to a relaxation of currently fierce ethnic tension and help build a truly multi-ethnic society.

At the same time, the moving spirits behind the new bloc want to see an injection of new blood into the Albanian political system and the retirement of compromised old hands.

The establishment of a united front came out of the blue. When the weekly magazine *Lobi* published reports in two issues before New Year outlining Ahmeti's ideas, there was no public reaction from Albanian parties. Although the plan had been circulating for months, the community's political representatives appeared afraid to confirm its existence.

The strong support they've recently expressed for the initiative suggests they now see it as a lifeline for parties that were widely seen as worn out. Only a few politicians have warned of a possible downside to the union, the elimination of political pluralism, for example.

The creation of the bloc is a personal triumph for Ahmeti. As the daily newspaper Vecer remarked, "He has managed to turn himself into a political figure fighting to preserve Albanian political unity".

While Albanian parties are submerging their individual identities in a common cause, the opposite process is taking place among their Macedonian counterparts, where new splits are emerging every day.

In the latest sign of fragmentation, Dosta Dimovska, Macedonia's moderate deputy prime minister, resigned from office last week after a row with nationalists in her own ruling Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation, VMRO-DPMNE, concerning police redeployment in former NLA-held areas.

Dimovska accused the hard line prime minister, Ljubco Georgievski, of flouting the Western-monitored scheme for ethnically-mixed police patrols to re-enter villages seized by the guerrillas during last year's insurgency.

The resignation of Dimovska, an influential figure in VMRO-DPMNE, is a victory for the nationalist wing in the government and poses a threat to the fragile peace process.

NATO, OSCE and EU representatives in Macedonia, who were all alarmed by the resignation, had hoped she would reconsider after the premier and VMRO's leadership urged her to stay on.

Dimovska had headed the government's Coordination Body for Managing the Crisis, CBMC, which was supervising the peace plan's implementation on the ground. As a result of her departure, plans for mixed police patrols to enter tense villages around the northern town of Kumanovo were temporarily suspended.

The government is now expected to dismiss the CBMC altogether. "It hasn't done its job," a government source said, adding that a new way of coordinating the activities of the police, army and international observers from the EU and OSCE will have to be found.

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