

Macedonia: DPA Accused of Dirty Tricks

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Albanian party charged with political cynicism in wake of siege drama.

An ethnic Albanian political party has been accused of cynically staging a two-month-long village siege, which raised fears of a renewal of inter-communal violence.

The Democratic Party of Albanians, DPA, is charged with engineering the crisis and then disingenuously playing a part in resolving it, in order to improve its domestic and international reputation.

Armed Albanians left the Macedonian village of Kondovo on December 17, after weeks of intense negotiation between the militants and members of Albanian political parties.

The Macedonian police had rejected public calls for them to storm the village - close to the capital Skopje - preferring to allow Albanian leaders to solve the problem.

For two months, Kalashnikov-wielding men dressed in camouflaged uniforms patrolled Kondovo and denied access to police and local journalists.

But in the aftermath of the standoff, there are claims that the drama was little more than a publicity stunt by local politicians eager to win credibility both at home and abroad.

The tense standoff had brought back memories of 2001, when the capture of the village of Tanusevci by Albanian guerrillas sparked ethnic conflict in the area. However, unlike three years ago, the fighters who marched into Kondovo did not appear to enjoy public support.

Iljaz, a 53-year-old local farmer, told IWPR that the armed men "should have left long ago" as violence solved nothing.

"While they were here we had no problems but we feared their presence could lead to the worst possible scenario," he said, a reference to villagers' fears of police action.

And Adnan, a 30-year-old taxi driver, said, "These people are not seeking rights, they are plain criminals."

Since losing Albanian electoral support to the Democratic Union for Integration party, DUI, in 2002, the DPA has been seen as a hard-line nationalist party and a potential threat to the Ohrid peace agreement that ended the fighting in 2001.

Representatives of the international community in Macedonia have since avoided contact with the DPA, whose vice-president Menduh Thaci was last year placed on the United States' blacklist of individuals alleged to have been obstructing the Ohrid accord.

In Kondovo, the DPA joined forces with their bitter opponents, the DUI, to bring the saga to an end.

“We managed to put out the fire that was smouldering in Kondovo,” said DPA leader Arben Xhaferi. “We have proved that Albanian political subjects can control the processes within the Albanian bloc.”

Ibrahim Mehmeti, an analyst with the Macedonian office of Search for Common Ground, said, “It was obvious that DPA had authority in Kondovo and they wanted to show they are a constructive player on the political scene.”

But there are suspicions that the DPA staged the crisis. Some claim that the Kondovo DPA official Agim Krasniqi was in charge of the militants and others have suggested that they were all party activists.

Former finance minister and political analyst Xhevdet Hajredini told IWPR, “In my opinion this entire situation was staged by the leadership of DPA. In Kondovo, they actually negotiated with the president of their local branch – Krasniqi.”

Suspicions have also been fuelled by the fact that a day before the crisis ended, Thaci declared that it was about to be resolved - a move that many read as a clear sign that the party was controlling the situation in the village.

DUI sources told IWPR, “All the armed men were DPA activists. It was no coincidence that Thaci knew when the standoff would be resolved.

“The aim was to show that DPA is a factor ahead of local elections but also that Thaci can be constructive, probably hoping that it would get his name off the US blacklist.”

Many of the few dozen men that controlled the village are believed to have been from Kosovo and south Serbia.

Police sources have told IWPR that these individuals – some of whom are wanted by UNMIK and Serb police on charges including rape, attempted murder and armed robbery – have since left Kondovo and Macedonia and illegally crossed over the border into Kosovo.

Police sources say that some of the Macedonian Albanians involved in Kondovo are also wanted on crimes committed after the 2001 conflict that are not covered by the amnesty for those who participated in the fighting.

One DUI official, who did not want to be named, warned there was a strong likelihood that the militants will return, “These people will not disappear, at least not before the March local elections.”

“I cannot exclude the possibility of similar situations happening in other areas controlled by the DPA.”

DPA spokesperson Sulejman Rusiti rejected allegations that his party had staged the Kondovo siege, “Since the very beginning of the crisis in Kondovo we were accused of being behind those [armed] men - and because of such fabrications we have decided not to reply to such allegations.”

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