

Milosevic May Cheat Justice

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Yugoslavia's new rulers are reluctant to extradite their former leader to The Hague.

The normalisation of Serbia will only be possible if the war crimes issue is addressed. Cooperation with The Hague will certainly be the biggest challenge for Kostunica and the new

authorities.

Kostunica's attitude towards the war crimes tribunal has been negative from the moment it was founded. On several occasions during the election campaign, he described it as "illegitimate" claiming it was more of a political than a judicial institution and "more of an American tribunal than the international court."

Kostunica said the tribunal's decision to indict Slobodan Milosevic was as "senseless as the NATO bombing was senseless."

One could understand such rhetoric in an election campaign when the onus was on trying to get nationalists on your side. But the view has now been reiterated in the wake of Milosevic's demise.

Zoran Djindjic of the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS, said the alliance was "very

sceptical" about dispatching Milosevic to The Hague. "It is not in our interest to drag the former president through the courts, " he said. " It is not in our interest to be the first state

in history to allow something like that."

Goran Svilanovic, of the Civic Alliance of Serbia, took a similar view, saying "Milosevic is no longer our priority".

For the moment, the international community has shown a large degree of tolerance. Driven by the desire to help the new authorities establish themselves, it has played down its demands for extradition.

Even the tribunal president, Claude Jorda, said the priority at the moment was the "consolidation" of democratic changes in Serbia. And, Jiri Dienstbier, the special UN envoy for Yugoslavia, in a

statement to the BBC, sought an amnesty for Milosevic so as to prevent bloodshed on the streets of Belgrade.

His call provoked widespread international condemnation. Human Rights Watch categorically rejected the appeal, insisting that the former president was behind ethnic cleansing and the massacres in Bosnia and Kosovo.

Kostunica is mistaken if he thinks the world will overlook Milosevic's crimes. What has been demanded from Croatia, will certainly be demanded of Serbia. "The Hague question" is a condition for obtaining financial support and the return of the Yugoslav federation to the international fold.

"I sincerely believe that The Hague is the only way to establish peace in the Balkans and to fully include Yugoslavia in Europe, " said the tribunal's chief prosecutor, Carla del Ponte.

The US administration may not have been clamouring for Milosevic's head in the past few days, but it has stressed that its policy of bringing Balkan war criminals to justice has not changed and that it rejects any future political role for Milosevic.

Del Ponte has already announced that she wishes to visit Belgrade. While the new authorities might not welcome any discussion of Milosevic's indictment, they may well be interested in any information she might have on the foreign bank accounts of his associates.

There have been some suggestions over the past week that the ex-president might be tried in Belgrade. The tribunal has not ruled out such a development. "It is best for

Milosevic to be tried in The Hague, " a tribunal spokesman said." A trial in Belgrade is possible

only with the permission and participation of The Hague tribunal."

Because of their reluctance to extradite Milosevic, the new Belgrade authorities have given him time to consolidate himself. He is not completely defeated. He will certainly employ the interior ministry, much of which remains loyal to him, to try to destabilise Kostunica.

Opposition leaders believe the former despot is finished. "Milosevic's departure is an irreversible act," said Zoran Djindjic. "The political crisis may last just a few months because of the power vacuum in Serbia."

The mood in the streets, however, is somewhat different. There are voices saying that Milosevic like Ceausescu should have been removed from the scene; that he could have been imprisoned for three months for trying to rig the elections at the very least.

It is obvious that the Serbian public has still not grasped the extent of Milosevic's crimes. It has not grasped the importance of The Hague tribunal for removing collective responsibility for these violations. While the entire Serbian community is responsible no one is guilty.

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