

## **Milosevic's Procrastination Keeps Election Threat At Bay**

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Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic scoffs at the opposition and its demand for early elections. Serbia will have to wait until his allies have finished piling up legislation designed to entrench his political position. The Serbian Parliament has yet to respond to an official request by the members of the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPO) for a debate and vote on a motion to call early elections, despite being in session for three days.

Instead the matter has been passed to the parliament's Judicial Committee for its view. And since once the current session is over the house is under no obligation to hold another until after the New Year, it looks highly likely that the whole matter will simply be quietly shelved for a couple of months.

Mila Mikovic, head of the SPO's parliamentary group of the SPO said this did not mean that the SPO request had been refused, and said they were giving the parliament until the end of Friday to respond. The SPO, which had hoped that the election motion would further bring out pro- and anti-regime figures, also wants to begin talks between regime officials and opposition groups.

Mikovic did not say what the SPO would do if the ruling Socialists and their coalition partners in parliament continued to ignore their motion, but the general view among observers was, not much. The SPO as a party appears to have been severely unnerved by the apparent assassination attempt on their iconoclastic leader, Vuk Draskovic, last month.

Thus the regime of Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, still the primary authority in Serbian politics, once more plays the procrastination game plan. "This legal game represents only a cover for his indecisiveness, since he knows that fair and democratic elections have no alternative," said the vice president of the Social Democracy party, Slobodan Orlic.

But the president of the opposition Democratic Alternative, Nebojsa Covic, described Milosevic's strategy as a humiliation for the democratic opposition.

It is not that Milosevic opposes elections - his coalition partner Vojislav Seselj of the Serbian Radical party say he will welcome the call - he just needs time to finish up his preparations. The strategy seems to be to call local elections before new Serbia wide parliamentary votes.

Seselj has said elections for the local authorities will be held in March next year. The regime aims to roll back the losses they sustained in 1996, when 28 municipalities, in which half of the Serbian electorate live, were won by the opposition. An attempt to invalidate the victories through the courts triggered the biggest anti-regime protests seen to date.

The opposition does not want local elections, but early elections at all levels. But if they are forced into elections loaded in Milosevic's favour - he retains overwhelming influence over the media - the opposition's only remaining weapon is a boycott, which would merely turn opposition held municipalities to regime control without a fight.

To ensure a boycott would smoothly deliver the elections to the regime the old system of elections with

two rounds, transferable votes and a minimum number of participants needed to validate the results is to go. Instead a new system will come in, giving victory to the candidate with a simple majority in a single round, regardless of voter turnout.

To further cover all eventualities, at the regime's behest, parliament has already tabled a bill designed to reduce the existing municipalities' authority and the funds at their disposal. This law on Local Authorities is exceptionally far reaching.

A suggestion from Vladan Batic, coordinator of the opposition Alliance for Changes (SZP), that opposition led municipalities might refuse to obey the Serbian government has been dismissed as impractical by some mayors. Funds are still routed through the government and the police remain under republic control.

Former professor of Belgrade University, Dragor Hiber, believes that this law has effectively abolished the local authorities in Serbia. "The adoption of this law was not motivated by the desire to take money from the municipal tills," he said.

"The authorities are not interested in snatching humanitarian aid going to opposition-led towns. Nor was this done due to circumvent the West's promise of emergency heating oil to towns like Pirot, Nis and other places ravaged by NATO bombing." "Many think that the adoption of the Law on Local Authority implies the government authorities are preparing for an absolute dictatorship."

The attack of the police on the students, the calls for the arrest of opposition leaders, the near death of Draskovic in a suspect car accident, the dismissals of 'disloyal' judges - all suggest that the regime is preparing an all or nothing gambit. In reply, the opposition continues to try and narrow the political differences between its constituent parties that have so weakened its protest campaign, while an accord between Draskovic's SPO and the Alliance for Changes is a long wait coming. The student organisation Resistance is not planning any more protest until November 22, despite calls for daily demonstrations in response to attacks by police that injured some 50 students on November 9.

Resistance activist Ivan Marovic told the Beta news agency that the organisation did not want the students beaten up every day. "That's why we have to think through our actions carefully. We will not achieve anything, if we have students being beaten up, and that their numbers get smaller every day," Marovic said.

The opposition says that only general elections and the departure of the current regime will solve the crisis, but the regime seems unwilling to go anywhere - at least, not without a fight.

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