

Montenegrians Block Hague Cooperation

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Moves by Montenegro's pro-Yugoslav party to block a law on cooperation with The Hague tribunal threatens the unity of the federation

Montenegro's Socialist Peoples Party, SNP, former allies of ousted Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, has rejected draft federal legislation on cooperation with The Hague tribunal, jeopardising the union with Serbia.

The SNP was catapulted into pole position in the federal parliament, after pro-independence Montenegrin parties boycotted the December 2000 Yugoslav elections.

With Milosevic gone, the party, which staunchly supports Montenegro's continued membership of the Yugoslav federation, formed a rather uneasy coalition with the Democratic Opposition of Serbia, DOS, in the federal parliament.

Should that government now fall apart as a result of disagreement over cooperation with The Hague, the long-running question of Yugoslavia's future make-up would be thrown wide open.

SNP leader Predrag Bulatovic said his party would continue to support a minority DOS administration at federal level, but without its Montenegrin component the right of the government to call itself truly federal would be called into question.

As a result, DOS would be forced to call new Yugoslav elections. And the coalition would have to try to find an alternative ally in Montenegro as enthusiastic for the preservation of the federation as the SNP. The trouble is that SNP's rivals, led by Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic, support Montenegrin secession.

The current crisis unfolded when the SNP rejected the proposed federal bill on cooperation with The Hague, introduced to regulate the extradition of Yugoslav war crimes' suspects to the tribunal.

The move has placed DOS in an impossible situation. The coalition is under immense international pressure, especially from the United States to pass the legislation before the foreign aid donors' conference scheduled for June 29. Washington has set acceptance of the law as a precondition for US attendance.

But on Tuesday night DOS and SNP leaders parted without agreement on getting the bill through the federal parliament. Another meeting was scheduled for June 8, but DOS spokesmen say they see little point in further discussion unless Bulatovic's party is prepared to change its stance.

That, however, looks unlikely. The SNP rejected the draft legislation after consultations with local party members. The party is not opposed in principle to cooperation with The Hague, but insists that it be conducted on republic rather than federal level.

The SNP with its pro-Milosevic pedigree is keen to avoid any accusations of betraying "national interests and dignity". As they do not form the government in Montenegro, devolving responsibility for controversial extraditions to Podgorica and Belgrade would conveniently enable the SNP to avoid taking such decisions.

The SNP demanded time to consult with members locally before deciding on whether to support the new law. Discussions ended last weekend with a rejection of the draft proposals. Only two people voted in favour.

The party had after all promised voters it would oppose extradition to The Hague, especially for Milosevic, in the run-up to Montenegro's parliamentary elections on April 22. The SNP, as the main party in the Together for Yugoslavia coalition, came a very close second to Djukanovic's bloc in an election dominated by the independence question.

Following Milosevic's downfall in October 2000, the SNP was quick to adapt to the new situation. Party leader Momir Bulatovic, Milosevic's prime minister and confidant, was sacrificed in favour of Predrag Bulatovic (no relation) in order to prove SNP loyalty to the new Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica.

This was a pragmatic move aimed at preserving the integrity of the federal republic. But an alliance between the anti-Milosevic DOS in Serbia and pro-Milosevic SNP in Montenegro was never going to be secure. SNP members and voters were unlikely to ditch their long-standing allegiance to Milosevic overnight.

The SNP's uncompromising stance on the legislation on cooperation with The Hague plays into the hands of the party's opponents in Montenegro - the pro-independence bloc. Besides the crucial issue of Montenegro's place within Yugoslavia, Djukanovic is a more natural ally of DOS.

Djukanovic, smarting from his less than convincing win in last month's parliamentary elections, has now been gifted another argument as to why a joint Montenegrin and Serbian state does not have a future.

The timing could not have been better for the Montenegrin president. Djukanovic has been shaken recently by newspaper reports linking him to alleged cigarette smuggling.

Should the federal government collapse, and with it possibly the Yugoslav federal system, local and international attention would soon be distracted from Djukanovic's alleged misdemeanours. The Montenegrin leader, as DOS's natural ally in the tiny republic, may also reclaim some of the international backing, which evaporated with the fall of Milosevic.

Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists, DPS, is not hiding the fact that the current misunderstanding between DOS and SNP is good news to them. DPS spokesman Igor Luksic said, "This is another confirmation that DOS's natural partners for co-operation between Montenegro and Serbia is the [pro-independence] Victory is Montenegrin coalition."

This doesn't mean Djukanovic has given up on his independence quest, although the project does appear to be on hold after the rather inconclusive April election result. He is probably buying time hoping to weaken his SNP opponents before commencing on negotiations with Belgrade over the future of the federal republic.

The SNP's stubborn refusal to endorse the proposed legislation has created a rift within the Together for Yugoslavia bloc. Dragan Soc's People's Party - until last year an ally of Djukanovic - supports full cooperation with The Hague and may split with the SNP over the issue.

In Belgrade the expectation is that the SNP will come around in the end. But this may be a rather optimistic

expectation.

Yugoslav Prime Minister Zoran Zizic, a senior SNP figure, is thought to take a softer line on The Hague, wary his job could depend on it. Bulatovic, however, is more mindful of his party's position. Should he give way, he would find himself under enormous pressure from local members, officials and voters - he cannot afford to play around with their support.

And that backing appears to hinge to a large extent on protecting Milosevic and others from a trip to The Hague.

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