

New Bishops Strengthen Macedonian Church's Hand

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Influx of new blood into synod likely to stiffen its resolve in long-running dispute with Serbian church.

Macedonia's Orthodox Church hierarchy, long embroiled in a battle for recognition by its Serbian counterpart, has boosted its ranks by admitting three new bishops, in what church-watchers say is a move to strengthen its hand in the dispute.

The church's governing body, the synod, voted to accept three new members all at once in April. The move was without precedent, as the synod in the past has only admitted new members one by one.

The three newcomers, bishops Metodij, Kliment and Pimen, were declared auxiliary bishops, which means they will not be able to vote in the Synod until later this year, when they expect promotion to the rank of diocesan bishops.

The new synod members are seen as an attempt to consolidate the position of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, MPC, in its decades-long struggle with the Serbian Orthodox Church, SPC.

The conflict peaked in 1967, when the MPC declared autocephaly, or ecclesiastical independence, from the Serbian church. The republic's communist authorities encouraged the move in order to bolster Macedonia's identity within the Yugoslav federation.

But neither the SPC nor Orthodox churches elsewhere have recognised the Macedonian secession.

One argument put forward by Serb churchmen is that the MPC is a child of the communist regime rather than a spiritual institution.

Bishop Metodij said the latest development counted against such a judgement. "The approval of the new bishops proves the contrary," he said. "It shows the Macedonian church is alive, growing and is being renewed."

Fr Zivko Panev, a theology professor at the St Sergej institute in Paris, agrees the appointment of the new bishops is a positive step.

The new members of the synod were all "young, educated and with experience as monks", he told IWPR.

"Most importantly, all three are loyal to the idea of the MPC's autocephaly," he added.

Bishop Kliment confirmed this. "The synod will be even more decisive [than before] on issues such as the autocephalous status of the church and its name," he told IWPR.

Experts say the new bishops' tough line on the all-important autocephaly question will strengthen the Macedonian synod in its dealings with the SPC even though the new bishops will not be directly involved in

the dispute.

They say it may also undo some of the damage inflicted on the church following a split in 2002, when a bishop formed a parallel church in Macedonia loyal to Serbia.

The split followed a Serbian proposal that the Macedonians should abandon their independence and settle for autonomy under an "Ohrid Archbishopric".

The MPC rejected the offer after a public outcry. But Jovan Vraniskovski, then Bishop of Veles, accepted the deal and in May 2003 Serb clerics appointed him bishop of the autonomous Ohrid Archbishopric, as the SPC now styles it.

Zoran Matevski, sociologist of religion at Skopje University, said the endorsement of the new bishops suggested the Macedonian synod had recovered its nerve after the row over the Serb proposal.

"This move shows the MPC is back on its feet after some initial confusion," he told IWPR, adding that he expected the new bishops to neutralise the damage caused by events in 2002.

"The SPC has always tried to control the church in Macedonia but did not have an effective tool to act on its behalf until [Bishop] Jovan joined them," a senior MPC source told IWPR.

Church sources admit Bishop Jovan made strong initial headway after gaining the support of several monks. But they also feel the renegade cleric has now peaked.

According to Bishop Kliment, "the Jovan episode is over". He Added, "Even the people who believed Jovan in the beginning have realised it was all a big media adventure. He does not have much support now among believers."

Some analysts say the expansion of the synod will also benefit the church by giving it a younger profile.

"It shows they want fresh blood in the main decision-making body, which was widely seen as a closed circle and as confused and insecure," said Ivan Blazevski, a journalist from the daily Vreme who covers church issues.

Church analyst Zoran Bojarovski agrees. "These bishops belong to a new generation, which has a more progressive stance compared to the old members of the synod," he told IWPR.

While the presence of the new bishops is likely to stiffen the Macedonian synod's resolve against Serb demands, the dispute remains on hold while the MPC refuses talks without third-party mediation.

The SPC does, however, have one more weapon up its sleeve. It has issued veiled threats to issue a "tomos" - an official proclamation that the Ohrid Archbishopric is only canonical church in Macedonia.

This verbal salvo would only inflame the dispute even further. But MPC officials dismiss the threat, saying they will not give up their autocephaly under duress.

"At this point there is no possibility for dialogue," the church's leader, Archbishop Stefan, told the local media recently.

"We will not talk to the SPC until it withdraws its decision [over the Ohrid Archbishopric] and changes its attitude towards us."

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