

Rugova Comeback?

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There are signs that Ibrahim Rugova, a peripheral political figure since the end of the war, is preparing to make a comeback.

Kosovo's pre-war pacifist leader, Ibrahim Rugova, and his party, the Democratic League of Kosovo, LDK, appear to be attempting to revive their waning political fortunes in the run-up to municipal elections in the autumn.

Rugova, who's made few public appearances since the end of the war, recently stepped back into the political spotlight with a highly publicised visit to the southeast town of Gnjilane (Gjilan), where he was greeted by several thousand party activists and supporters.

At the same time, junior LDK officials have been much more active at local authority level, raising the party's profile and competing for council posts.

The undisputed leader of the Kosovo Albanians before the war, Rugova's standing in the province dropped significantly during and after the conflict.

A televised meeting between him and Slobodan Milosevic, apparently discussing the province's future at the height of the Serbian ethnic cleansing campaign, turned many Kosovars against Rugova and his party.

And in the wake of the war, claims by political rivals that his policy of passive resistance against Belgrade only perpetuated Albanian suffering further eroded support and led to a backlash against LDK officials - some of whom were murdered.

Rugova's cause hasn't been helped by upheavals within the LDK. A number of senior officials have left in protest over party policy, the most recent being one of his closest aides, Milazim Krasniqi.

The trouble with the LDK is that it has not adapted to post-war conditions. The party programme has changed little since the party was formed over ten years ago. Some wonder whether it has any strategy at all.

In truth, though, other parties appear similarly lacking in ideas. All talk of the need for independence, but none have tried to tackle social and economic problems, such as Kosovo's growing unemployment.

Rugova, meanwhile, has not helped either his party or himself by keeping a very low profile. He works closely with UNMIK, issues statements denouncing ethnic violence and appealing for greater co-operation with the international institutions in the province. He does very little else.

There are two possible explanations for Rugova's inactivity. It might well be that he's run out of steam and has very little else to offer, or that he's simply biding his time, waiting for his political rivals to make mistakes.

"Maybe he's stuck in that old style of passive resistance politics and has nothing more to say," said one Pristina student. "On the other hand, he could just be waiting for others to fail."

The latter possibility is the more likely. The wait-and-see approach was his favoured tactic before the war. Moreover, his recent Gnjilane visit and the revival of LDK activity at local authority level all point to him preparing a comeback.

While Rugova's prospects at the moment do not look great, he probably wouldn't have to put in too much effort to improve his chances of doing well at the forthcoming municipal polls. After all, many people have an emotional attachment to him despite his mistakes. And the sniff of corruption surrounding some of his rivals could well lose them votes.

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