

The Ruling Bosnian Muslim Coalition Falls Apart

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Recent days have brought further changes to the already complicated Bosnian political scene. The ruling Bosnian Muslim coalition has broken apart opening the door for the leading opposition Social Democratic Party to claim more power.

Only five months short of local elections, scheduled for April 2000, the Bosnian political scene is experiencing almost daily upheaval. The most important development during the past week was the final disintegration of the ruling Bosnian Muslim Coalition for United and Democratic Bosnia (KCDBiH), which collapsed under the weight of a growing inside power struggle.

The four parties making up the coalition had agreed to keep their current candidates in state-level positions until the next presidential elections, scheduled for November 2000. But the April 2000 local elections are already becoming a battleground of the former allies.

The collapse of the coalition opens a wide range of possibilities for future alliances in Bosnian politics, but above all, it improves the prospects for the leading opposition party, the Social Democratic Party (SDP).

The disintegration of the KCDBiH has been a long been expected. This split divides the coalition along its main axis, dividing the two strongest parties - the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) led by Alija Izetbegovic, the Muslim member of the Presidency, and the Party For Bosnia-Herzegovina (SZBiH), led by Bosnian Co-Premier Haris Silajdzic.

Silajdzic was one of the founders and top leaders of the SDA. But constant rifts between hard-liners and moderates within the SDA, as well as ideological and personal differences between Silajdzic and Izetbegovic, forced Silajdzic to leave SDA in 1996. Silajdzic and several, fellow SDA moderates then established the SZBiH.

In the 1996 elections, however, the SZBiH was heavily defeated, forcing Silajdzic and his party to form an unhappy coalition with SDA. Two smaller parties, the Liberals (LS) and Civic-Democratic Party (GDS) also joined, hoping for a small piece of cake for themselves.

Continued cooperation between Izetbegovic and Silajdzic proved to be the key in subsequent election victories for the KCDBiH. But each of the four parties demanded ever more power and high-level positions for itself.

In addition feuds continued between hard-liners and moderates within the SDA. It was these internal divisions which forced Izetbegovic to run in the 1998 ballot, despite his stated desire to retire. As hard-liners within the SDA gained more influence they demanded Silajdzic's seat on the Premiership for themselves. Meanwhile several SZBiH moderates believed their best prospects lay in an alliance with the Social Democratic Party and other opposition parties.

Over the past year the pressure from these constant power-struggles became intolerable until the final "grand finale" erupted on November 8, closing day for the registration of coalitions ahead of the April elections.

According to sources in the SDA and the SZBiH, dramatic negotiations continued right up to the last moments. The two smaller coalition partners, the LS and GDS were presented with an ultimatum offering a

reduced share of power. Told to "take it or leave it" both parties opted for "leave it" and formed instead a new, Liberal-Civic Coalition.

The two strongest Muslim parties finally agreed to form another, even weaker coalition - the Union for United and Democratic Bosnia-Herzegovina. This coalition will fight elections together in the Bosnian Serb-half of the country and in a few regions where Muslims are in a minority. In the key regions of Sarajevo, Tuzla and Zenica, however, the two parties will become bitter foes.

All the independent newspapers in Sarajevo ran with the headline "KCDBiH Coalition falls apart". Some SDA and SZBiH officials, however, continued to insist that the two parties remain in an alliance.

Foreign and local, independent analysts argue Izetbegovic's SDA party now has little chance of holding onto power in key cities like Sarajevo, Tuzla and Zenica. Rather the more moderate and pro-western Silajdzic and the SDP opposition leader Zlatko Lagumdžija appear to have much better prospects.

Up to now Izetbegovic has mainly survived on the votes of refugees and rural communities, but a recent internal poll confirmed that this support was trickling away. In a survey conducted by local SDA officials in 61 Muslim-dominated municipalities, SDA support had risen in only two places, while in 19 the SDA position had deteriorated.

These results come at a time when the local, independent media are uncovering new cases of corruption and criminal activity involving SDA officials on an almost daily basis.

Sources within both the SDA and the SZBiH confirm that the only real link connecting the two parties now is the strange love-hate relation between Izetbegovic and Silajdzic. A final rift between the two does seem inevitable - it is a question only of when.

Party sources have hinted that Izetbegovic and Silajdzic will contest the November 2000 presidential elections on separate sides or within new coalitions and alliances, opening a new page in post-war Bosnian politics.

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