

Serbia May Return Right-Wing President

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Rifts inside the democratic bloc may hand the country's top job to the extreme right.

Fears are growing that if the governing centrist parties fail to field a joint presidential candidate, the ultra-nationalist Serbian Radical Party, SRS, could snatch victory.

Analysts raised this concern after Predrag Markovic, parliamentary speaker and acting Serbian president, announced on March 4 that the ballot would be held on June 13.

Parliament had earlier abolished the law that required the presidential winner to gain more than 50 per cent of total ballots cast in the first round. The change means that following four failed presidential elections since 2002, Serbia is now certain to get a new president irrespective of voter turnout.

So far, the SRS's deputy head Tomislav Nikolic and Boris Tadic, head of the Democratic Party, DS, have announced they will run.

Most independent political analysts believe Nikolic is heading for victory by default, benefiting from internecine bickering within the "pro-democracy" bloc.

According to Cedomir Cupic, professor of political sciences at Belgrade University, relations between the pro-democracy parties are characterised by "mutual hatred, malice, revanchism and spite".

Bitter animosity between Vojislav Kostunica, now Serbia's prime minister, and Zoran Djindjic - the former Serbian premier who was assassinated in March 2003 - laid the way for the eventual downfall of the first democratic government last year.

The mutual antipathy between Kostunica's Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS, and Djindjic's DS also blocked the formation of a stable pro-democracy government following parliamentary elections in December 2003.

After talks with the DS fell through, the remaining centrist parties - the DSS, the reformist G17 Plus, the Serbian Renewal Movement, SPO, and New Serbia, NS - were forced to seek the backing in parliament of the Socialist Party of Serbia, SPS, whose leader Slobodan Milosevic is on trial for war crimes in The Hague.

At the insistence of G17 Plus, talks between the pro-democracy parties aimed at fielding a joint candidate for the presidential poll are set to take place in the near future.

But even if these talks place, they are unlikely to result in an agreement on a joint candidate as the DSS wants this person from its own ranks, and the DS will not consider withdrawing Tadic's candidacy.

Analysts say Tadic was forced to go public with his nomination in order to bolster his own profile as head of the party and a major opposition leader. "I don't want to beg anyone for support. I am ready to run this presidential race on my own as the DS candidate," Tadic recently told a party meeting in Vojvodina.

However many believe that Tadic's only chance of winning the election by a narrow margin is if the entire democratic bloc supports his candidacy - and that would mean obtaining clear and unambiguous backing from Kostunica and the DSS.

Analyst Ognjen Pribicevic told IWPR that Tadic's chances of obtaining such support look slim, though he did not rule out the possibility of a last-minute agreement on a joint candidate in the next month or so.

As matters stand, the fact that Tadic has already announced his nomination on behalf of the DS "effectively means that an agreement between the four democratic options has not been reached", according to Pribicevic.

Many observers believe the pro-democratic parties will end up fielding at least two presidential candidates. In addition to Tadic, a nominee from a party inside the current government will most probably announce his or her intention to stand.

But this will not be one of the major party leaders, as both Kostunica from the DSS and Miroljub Labus of G17 Plus have made it clear they will not be standing.

Vladimir Goati, of the Belgrade Social Sciences Institute, said the lack of a convincing opponent would diminish the chances of anyone beating Nikolic. "The victory of a democratic candidate in the presidential race would require a series of miracles taking place - one after another," Goati told the Novi Sad newspaper, Gradjanski List.

The consequences of such a victory at home and abroad have yet to be made clear.

The Serbian constitution gives the president few substantial powers. At the same time, the SRS is keen to downplay fears that Nikolic's win may throw the Balkans into turmoil.

Aleksandar Vucic, SRS secretary general, told IWPR he doubted there would be much reaction abroad. "Everyone will be waiting to see Nikolic's first steps," he said. "Nikolic may surprise many with his attitude towards the international community. He will undoubtedly continue to pursue the course of integration into the European Union."

Slobodan Markovic, of the Belgrade Institute for European Studies, does not share such this rosy view of a Nikolic presidency, however. He maintains an SRS triumph will lead the country into international isolation.

Citing the United States' suspension of a financial aid package worth about 100 million US dollars on March 31 owing to Belgrade's "insufficient cooperation with the Hague tribunal", Markovic said Serbia's ties with the international community depended on three factors, "The first is cooperation with the tribunal, the second is reform of the army and security services, and the third is carrying out reformist legislation. If Nikolic wins, it is clear the first two conditions will not be met."

Markovic said Serbia's best chances lay in the international community sending a clear signal to voters that opting for a pro-reform course would lead to fast-track integration into Europe.

"The EU should clearly formulate the conditions for Serbia-Montenegro's membership and provide stronger support for economic reforms," he said.

Europe should also provide more substantial credit arrangements to stimulate more employment, he said, adding, "Wide-scale unemployment in Serbia is the main reason why so many people vote for the SRS."

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