

Serbia: PM Poll Bid in Jeopardy

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The Serbian premier's hopes of consolidating his power base in the republic have been dealt a serious blow.

The prime minister has suffered a considerable setback in his campaign to secure a close ally as the next president of Serbia, after several parties in the republic's ruling coalition said they wanted to field their own candidates in the September 29 ballot.

The parties appear to have been alienated by Djindjic's expulsion from parliament of deputies from Democratic Party of Serbia, DSS led by his rival, Vojislav Kostunica, the President of Yugoslavia.

Three parties in the Democratic Opposition of Serbia coalition, DOS, have said they will field their own candidates for the presidency, in a further sign that Djindjic's coalition power base is melting away.

If more DOS parties fail to back his candidate, Miroljub Labus, it will deal the premier a serious blow, bearing in mind that the presidential elections will be widely seen as a decisive contest between him and his arch-rival, Kostunica.

Labus, currently federal deputy prime minister and a man with strong reformist credentials, has so far received the support of just three out of the ruling coalition's 17 parties.

DOS assumed power after the fall of Slobodan Milosevic's regime in October 2000. Parliamentary elections that December gave the coalition a landslide victory. With 45 seats, Kostunica's party emerged as the most popular single force.

But a combination of personal rivalry and political struggles between Kostunica and Djindjic soon caused the coalition to crumble into competing factions.

A parliamentary council composed of Djindjic's allies expelled the DSS deputies from the 250-seat assembly last week. In doing so, the coalition bolstered its majority in parliament, but ceased to represent the broad political alliance that came to power after the overthrow of Milosevic.

Djindjic's moves to strengthen his leadership and secure a majority for his fragile government has alienated many parties in the DOS coalition who saw the dismissal of the DSS deputies as autocratic and a blatant violation of voters' wishes.

Some coalition parties expressed private disquiet over the sackings, and two made their disapproval public - the Democratic Centre, led by Dragoljub Micunovic, and the Vojvodina Reformists, led by Mile Isakov, Serbia's deputy prime minister.

While Djindjic still managed to rally enough support within the alliance for the dismissals, the coalition parties have so far been less inclined to go along with his presidential candidate.

New Serbia, led by Velimir Ilic, mayor of Cacak, in western Serbia, and the Christian Democrats, led by Vladan Batic, Serbia's justice minister, said they would definitely field their own candidates.

The Democratic Centre has also threatened to do so - and if it does it could provide the most serious challenge to Labus. The reason for this is that the party's likely candidate - its leader Dragoljub Micunovic, speaker of the federal parliament - could split the pro-reformist vote.

Micunovic would draw support from the same liberal centrists who might have voted for Labus, thus benefiting Kostunica who, many believe, will stand as a candidate in the ballot.

Serbian deputy premier and Belgrade's Kosovo coordinator, Nebojsa Covic, of the Democratic Alternative, another DOS party, may also announce his candidacy if Micunovic doesn't run.

If Djindjic's man loses, fresh parliamentary elections look inevitable and some coalition parties are likely to shift politically towards Kostunica. A Labus victory will clearly strengthen the Serbian premier's hand, and he is likely to reshuffle the ruling alliance, appointing only parties loyal to him.

In future, there's a possibility that a third political bloc may emerge to rival Kostunica and Djindjic. A letter sent by Isakov in May to leaders of seven centre-left coalition parties, calling on them to resist Djindjic's increasing grip on power, appears a harbinger of such an outcome.

Isakov told the Belgrade magazine Reporter on July 30 he did not want to leave the coalition but suggested "a strong social-democrat faction in DOS might be formed, which would be as powerful as Djindjic's DS and Kostunica's DSS". Some observers are already calling it "the third way" movement.

It might comprise two sets of parties. One - The Democratic Centre, Democratic Alternative and New Democracy - are seen as a centre-right grouping. The other - the Social Democrats, Civic Alliance of Serbia and various regional and ethnic-based parties - are firmly anti-nationalist and reformist in orientation.

Regardless of the outcome of the presidential elections, one thing is certain. The coalition that toppled Milosevic in October 2000 is in its last phase of decay.

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