

Serbian Opposition Mobilises

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The opposition employs people power to persuade Milosevic to concede electoral defeat

A week after presidential, federal and local elections, Serbia has risen.

Rallies are taking place in downtown Belgrade. All the streets are blocked. Crowds of citizens unite around a single demand - that Slobodan Milosevic concedes electoral defeat and steps down as president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Serbia, responding to the call of the Democratic Opposition alliance, DOS, has embarked on a general strike. Hundreds of thousands of citizens have heeded the cry.

Shocked by the election defeat, state television, RTS, at first barely mentioned the results. It then went on the offensive and on Sunday evening broadcast Serbian president Milan Milutinovic announcing that the regime would do everything to secure victory in the second round.

But not all regime supporting media have followed suit. Many local radio stations previously sympathetic to the authorities are refusing to rebroadcast RTS programmes. Radio Obrenovac, Radio Smederevo, Radio Novi Besej, Radio Zajesar, Radio Sabac and Radio Lazarevac are only some of those local media to have changed their editorial policy overnight.

Also, some 50 journalists at the regime supporting Vecernje novosti newspaper called for its editor, Dusan Cukic, to resign and a change in editorial policy.

It is rumoured in Belgrade that Milosevic's wife, Mirjana Markovic, is furious with Cukic for clumsily touching up a photo from a regime election rally in an effort to exaggerate the number of people attending the event. The episode was the main topic of conversation in Belgrade and destroyed any remaining trust in the regime newspapers.

For the first time in 13 years, the steely power that Milosevic held with support from the police, army and state organs, is under threat. His rule has been a miasma of private, marital and party interests. It was a rule that led Serbia into a series of wars and isolation.

The only remaining question is how long will Milosevic take to understand that he has lost everything.

Under the complete misapprehension that he was holding all the strings and remained the most popular person in Serbia, Milosevic incautiously scheduled the elections for September 24.

He was misled by party analyses that the Serbian opposition could never unite behind one person. He was convinced that the propaganda of the so-called 'Reconstruction' after the NATO strikes impressed the electorate. He was also emboldened by his constitutional changes and the sweet possibility that he might stay in power for eight more years.

But to Milosevic's astonishment, police repression against the anti-regime youth movement, Otpor, (Resistance) and the opposition served only to fuel discontent.

It also opened the eyes of many in the ruling Socialist Party of Serbia, SPS, to the influence on Milosevic of the most extreme and completely irrational cadres of the United Yugoslav Left, JUL, such as Federal Information Minister Goran Matic, Federal Telecommunications Minister Ivan Markovic or JUL President Ljubisa Ristic.

Milosevic and his wife, the leader of JUL, who many see as the force behind the president, developed a psychotic ambition - to turn Serbia into a fortress that would destroy the 'New World Order'.

The madness spread in the state media could not be stopped; even Milosevic's former admirers understood that something was wrong there, that it simply wasn't normal.

The role of Mirjana Markovic, who was personally involved in the election campaign, is crucial to understanding Milosevic's fall. Thanks to her husband, Markovic's party has acquired substantial influence over Serbian politics and society, despite the fact that it has little voter support. In local elections in 1996, JUL won in only several poor municipalities in the south of Serbia.

With their haughtiness, arrogance and inflammatory statements, JUL officials created chaos in the SPS. Many party members warned for years that they would be destroyed by 'brigands' from within their own ranks.

There is one more important, but less well known detail. In the September 24 election, Markovic wanted the job of chairwoman of the chamber of citizens in the federal parliament. According to the FRY constitution, the holder of the post would become head of state should the incumbent be unable to fulfil his duties.

The scene of the couple going to vote September 24 was revealing. In his very manner Milosevic expressed how much he detests elections. What a folly that he should be elected by anyone, when he knows what is best for his people. He looked furious and ill-tempered, his face locked in a grimace.

Mira, in her purple outfit, looked confused and depressed. That scene - Slobodan and Mira at the polling booth - will remain as an abiding image in the closing act of their tyrannical reign.

The election results were a shock both for the authorities and the opposition. No one could have forecast the DOS success. In the presidential vote, the regime claim that Vojislav Kostunica did not win over 50 per cent of the votes is fiercely disputed by DOS.

The Federal Electoral Commission decision to declare a second round of voting triggered a predictable reaction. DOS rejected a new ballot. The citizens have taken to the streets to demand that their choice be respected. The regime - still in terminal shock - launched a futile campaign to show that the Americans - read CIA - rigged the elections in Serbia, bribed the citizens and provoked the crisis in which Serbia's enemies are basking.

Never have such words sounded more hollow than today. The regime can only see conspiracies and enemies. It refuses to see the demonstrations, protests and the general strike spreading across Serbia like wildfire.

Ljubisa Ristic, who usually acts as a mouthpiece for Mirjana Markovic, has given us a hint of what's to come. Ljubisa says the office of the FRY president is only ceremonial role. He says the SPS and JUL will put Milosevic up as a candidate for federal prime minister, forgetting that the holder of the post is appointed by the FRY president, i.e., by Kostunica.

Ljubisa also says the local elections are not important, since the Socialists are in power at republican level. But he forgets that they hold their majority only thanks to the votes of the Serbian Radical Party, which has turned its backs on them.

Meanwhile, the rats are jumping the sinking ship.

The actor Milorad Mandic Manda, a prominent JUL member, sent an open letter to Milosevic, saying, "We lost these elections, let's congratulate the winners!"

The fear gripping the regime is almost palpable. Goran Matic, who produced 'spies' on state television for months and stated euphorically on the eve of the elections that Milosevic would win with 70 per cent of the vote, is nowhere to be seen.

Ivan Markovic, who said that Milosevic would win the election with 100 per cent, has also fallen silent. Gorica Gajevic, the SPS secretary general, who designed the election campaign so 'wisely', has similarly vanished.

We all wait for the regime's reaction to the general strike and the opposition refusal to contest a second round. Will Milosevic call the police and the army to his rescue? Will he stage some attack in Kosovo, in a desperate attempt to busy Serbia with war? Or, will he, now that he is cornered, be forced to acknowledge his defeat?

All is possible where Milosevic is concerned. However, there is little chance that he will personally acknowledge his defeat. What is certain, is that he will try to buy at any price what he needs most: time.

But Serbia has risen. Hopefully Milosevic will not get what he needs, several days to consider how to free himself from this bind. For the first time, he has been caught in a trap of his own making.

However, whatever might happen, whatever he tries - he is finished!

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