

Serbian Power Struggle

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Political rivals Vojislav Kostunica and Zoran Djindjic are heading for an electoral showdown

Unbridgeable political differences between former allies Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica and Serbian prime minister Zoran Djindjic are threatening to destroy the ruling DOS coalition.

Should the governing alliance collapse and Montenegro opt to leave the Yugoslav federation, general elections will almost certainly be held before the end of the year.

Indeed, Kostunica has told his Democratic Party of Serbia, one of the most influential members of DOS, that the next party congress, expected in next two months, will be used to prepare for elections.

Kostunica and Djindjic disagree on a range of substantive issues and barely conceal their dislike for one another.

One of the main issues on which they fail to see eye to eye is Serbia's policy towards The Hague.

Kostunica is critical of the Serbian government's willingness to gradually meet the demands of the tribunal, which he regards as political and anti-Serb.

At the weekend, the Yugoslav president spoke out against the Djindjic administration's extradition of Bosnian Serb Milomir Stakic to The Hague. He said it was unacceptable because the federal parliament has yet to pass legislation on cooperation with the tribunal.

Washington has threatened to renege on financial aid unless Slobodan Milosevic is arrested by the end of March. The detention on Monday of eleven of his closest associates has prompted speculation that he may soon be behind bars.

While Kostunica would almost certainly have been against these latest arrests, Djindjic will see it as a means of gathering more evidence for an indictment against Milosevic.

An IWPR source close to the Serbian government said Djindjic last week failed to persuade Washington to extend its deadline for Milosevic's arrest, but apparently won its backing in his power struggle with Kostunica.

The IWPR source said Djindjic warned the US that if it stuck to its deadline it would weaken his government and strengthen "conservative" pro-Kostunica forces in the DOS alliance.

Another subject on which the two leaders have expressed differences of opinion is the conflict between Serbian forces and ethnic Albanian rebels in southern Serbia.

The Yugoslav president is unhappy over the involvement of deputy Serbian prime minister Nebojsa Covic

in ceasefire negotiations. He believes Covic is only motivated by self-interest and has been critical of his decision to ban pro-Kostunica Yugoslav army generals from making public statements on the crisis.

Many observers believe this is why army Chief of Staff General Nebojsa Pavkovic, whose loyalty to Kostunica is unquestioned, has been playing an increasingly prominent role in southern Serbia.

Interestingly, Djindjic is not known to be a fan of Covic's mediating role in the conflict, but has given him his backing simply because of Kostunica's objections.

Another area of disagreement between the two is Washington's call for Belgrade to stop assisting the army of Republika Srpska. Kostunica believes the request violates the Dayton agreement, while Djindjic is willing to cooperate.

The two leaders have also accused each other of exceeding their authority. Djindjic claims Kostunica has been exerting far more influence than his constitutional powers allow. Meanwhile, Kostunica has berated Djindjic for setting up specialist government agencies to sideline his supporters.

At the same time, the political rivals have sought to strengthen their positions by expanding their support base.

Djindjic has attempted to win over voters in Vojvodina whose political parties have been waging a war of words with Kostunica over his refusal to grant them autonomy.

Kostunica, meanwhile, has been wooing supporters of Milosevic's Socialist Party of Serbia - with some success. "We support President Kostunica's strategic direction," said senior SPS official Nikola Sainovic.

In recent months, both men have sought to emphasise their political identities. The Yugoslav president views himself as a moderate nationalist with a high degree of respect for the rule of law, while the Serbian premier considers himself to be a progressive, pro-western politician.

The latter is trying to compensate for his ideological meanderings over the past ten years by making much of his pragmatism and desire for reform.

But for all his growing political stature, Djindjic is not yet ready to challenge Kostunica at the polls, as he knows the Yugoslav president remains much more popular than him.

Djindjic knows that he is likely to alienate a lot of people with his government's austerity measures - in particular the freezing of salaries at a time when the cost of living is spiraling.

This is why the Serbian premier will probably try to postpone an electoral showdown with Kostunica for as long as possible, providing him time to gain more and more political influence - which he will use to curb his rival's room for manoeuvre.

What's increasingly clear is that the fate of the many political and economic reforms that have been talked about in Serbia will only be decided once the Belgrade power struggle is played out.

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