

TUDJMAN'S PARTY BURIED

Author: [Drago Hedl](#)

The social-democratic coalition trounced the late president's party in the parliamentary poll, securing a clear mandate and a coalition strong enough to implement far-reaching reform.

Only three weeks after the death of Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, his Croatian Democratic Party (HDZ) has been literally buried in parliamentary elections, held January 3.

An opposition coalition uniting the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Croatian Social-Liberal Party (HSL) defeated the HDZ in nine out of ten electoral districts. Together with other parties, which together formed an alliance known as "the six", the opposition won two-thirds of the parliamentary seats.

No one in the opposition camp had dared hope for such a victory and no opinion polls had anticipated such a result. The turn out was exceptionally high, with more than 75 per cent of voters casting their ballots - a percentage not seen since the first multi-party elections in 1990.

The scale of the defeat has left the HDZ in a serious state of shock. With incredible arrogance the party had claimed the laurels for founding the independent state of Croatia and defending the country in 1991. By seizing control of the media, the HDZ perpetuated these myths and manipulated public opinion.

But the reality was quite different. Political and economic power in Croatia was shared out among a ruling elite of around 200 families, with the Tudjman clan at the head. The country is now impoverished, economic output is half that of 1990 and foreign debt has risen to \$9.6 billion.

Tudjman's provocative policy in Bosnia-Herzegovina, his stubborn refusal to cooperate with the Hague war crimes tribunal and his fierce nationalism brought Croatia international isolation.

Croatia's voters acknowledged all this at the ballot box, dismissing HDZ scare-mongering that without them the country would revert to communism. In fact the HDZ has 60,000 former communists in its ranks, more than all the other parties put together.

New Prime Minister Ivica Racan of the SDP and his coalition partner Drazen Budisa of the HSL said they will need time to assess all the problems they have inherited from the previous administration. But they have already announced drastic cuts in public expenditure including a reduction in ministerial salaries, an end to the extravagance typical of the Tudjman's era, cuts in defence and police budgets, an end to the financing of Herzeg-Bosnia. Furthermore the coalition promises a revision of former state owned companies seized and plundered by HDZ supporters.

Without foreign investment the government will struggle to reduce Croatia's 20 per cent unemployment rate. Hence the coalition government has announced a more cooperative policy towards the international community, including respect for the democratic standards of the West.

Having secured 40 per cent of the vote, the SDP and HSL coalition could form a government on their own. The other four opposition parties won only 15 per cent. But abiding by agreements with the four other parties, a six-party coalition government will be formed, including the Croatian Peasants' Party, the Croatian People's Party, the Liberal Party, and the Istrian Democratic Assembly.

Combined the six party coalition will enjoy a crucial two-thirds majority in parliament, allowing vital constitutional changes. The opposition promised, during the election campaign, to reduce the enormous powers held by the president.

While Tudjman was alive the opposition had demanded a public statement that he would abide by the election results and had proposed a special law to ensure a peaceful hand-over of power. Neither demand was met.

Croatia is now in an unusual situation. There is no head of state, the parliament is disbanded and the government voted out of office. But no one it seems fears a violent backlash from the HDZ.

Without Tudjman, and having won only 24 per cent of the vote, it is improbable that the HDZ will embark on anything as adventurous as a coup d'etat. The HDZ's natural ally, the extreme right-wing Croatian Party of Rights, won only five seats in parliament.

Croatia is now waiting for the presidential elections, scheduled for January 24. After a great deal of internal argument, the HDZ candidate will be Mate Granic, Tudjman's long-standing foreign minister. Even though he is the HDZ's most popular politician, he suffered a serious defeat in his electoral district, securing only 21 per cent. Incoming Prime Minister Racan won 51 per cent of the votes in his district.

Granic's chances of presidential victory have now been significantly reduced despite his good showing in opinion polls taken before the parliamentary elections. Racan's partner Budisa now looks favourite to replace Tudjman as president.

Should Budisa win the presidential elections, the rapid dismantling of the Tudjman era will follow. This will not be an easy process. But when the January 3 results were released, Croatia breathed a sigh of relief.

Dragutin Hedl is a regular contributor to IWPR in Zagreb.

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