

Violence And Tension Mar Bosnia Poll

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Nationalist bullies intimidate voters in the run-up to this weekend's municipal elections

In an atmosphere of renewed ethnic tensions, Bosnians are preparing themselves for local elections which could prove crucial for the fate of the war-battered country.

With international patience wearing out and attention - and funds - shifting away, western officials have been urging Bosnians to vote for changes, and to abandon the increasingly unscrupulous nationalist leaders who continue to cling on to power.

The ballot also comes amidst strengthening international efforts to sideline Bosnian war crimes suspects, hard-liners and corrupt politicians.

Five days ahead of the vote, NATO troops arrested their most senior war crimes suspect to date. The high profile arrest of Momcilo Krajisnik - the closest wartime ally of Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic - sent an unmistakable message - Bosnia is no longer a safe haven.

Over the last six months, international agencies have removed more than 30 local politicians from office, and blocked the candidature of up to 50 others, for violating election regulations and the Dayton peace accord.

In interviews before the elections, Bosnia's High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch said that the "rapidly escalating economic crisis" in the country required serious political changes and economic reforms, and exhorted citizens to "take a chance and vote for change".

Yet according to independent analysts, hard-liners in the ruling parties have been deliberately raising ethnic tensions in the run-up to Saturday's ballot, hoping to intimidate people into choosing the nationalist option by orchestrating violence against returning refugees and minorities.

More than 30 incidents occurred in March alone, mostly in Republika Srpska, where at least one Muslim returnee was killed and other refugees were injured in a series of bombing, stonings and mob attacks.

None of the perpetrators have been arrested, according to Wolfgang Petritsch's office, despite appeals to judicial authorities to do so.

Meanwhile, pamphlets issued by the ultra-nationalist Bosnian Serb Radical Party call on Serbs to "smash the ballot boxes" and boycott the elections with violence if necessary. Similar messages have been heard from Bosnian Croat nationalists.

Republika Srpska has had no president for a year after Petritsch dismissed Nikola Poplasen for obstructing the implementation of the peace accord. Its parliament is deadlocked, as no party has a sufficient majority to rule. Only support from western governments - mindful that the pro-western ruling coalition fell because of internal power-sharing disputes - is propping up the minority caretaker government of Milorad Dodik.

Similar political bickering has blocked decision-making in the Muslim-Croat federation for over a year.

In this political climate, international agencies charged with peace implementation have decided on more radical tactics.

The OSCE for example has steadily tightened electoral regulations. Elected officials may now occupy only one position in law-making, executive or company offices. Candidates who are illegally occupying refugees' houses are banned from standing for office.

The OSCE has also spared no money or effort in preparing Bosnians for this Saturday's ballot. The flood of flyers, television jingles and newspaper ads is unprecedented, and not without controversy. The ruling nationalist parties say the OSCE slogan - "vote for change" - shows the international community's bias for moderate opposition parties.

Certainly, a vote for moderate parties is seen by many to be Bosnia's last chance for a prosperous, easier future. On the other hand, continued support for wartime nationalist leaders would almost certainly seal the country's fate as Europe's blind alley for years to come.

It's uncertain, though, whether Bosnia's 2.5 million eligible voters will deliver real changes.

The former communist Social Democratic Party, SDP, is the western favourite. The leading opposition party has been opening offices and campaigning vigorously nationwide. According to the Washington-based National Democratic Institute, NDI, the SDP can expect 49 per cent of the vote in these areas, while the ruling Party of Democratic Action, SDA, - fallen from grace thanks to corruption, internal feuding and incompetence - can expect only nine per cent.

Hard-line support in Croat-held areas has been declining since the defeat of the nationalist HDZ party in Croatia last year, but though the SDP is predicted to win 41 per cent of the vote - compared to the HDZ's 31 per cent - it's not certain how much the SDP could play a real role in these areas.

In Serb-held territories, the ruling Sloga (Unity) party is predicted to win 36 per cent, while the opposition nationalist Serbian Democratic Party can expect 29 per cent.

Still, many observers feel the April 8 elections will bring real change only in Muslim areas. Even if the SDP does get support in nationalist-held areas, as is likely, it will probably not have enough seats to play a real role in decision-making.

A tied result would complicate matters still further, with the ruling nationalist parties expected to stall implementation of the election results until they can shift power to other institutions where they have a majority.

That said, international organisations in Bosnia have powers to prevent this and can even neutralise negative election results. Probably the real importance of this week's ballot is to test the state of minds of Bosnian voters ahead of the general elections scheduled for October this year.

Hopefully, they'll vote with the words of OSCE head Robert Barry in mind: "Don't be afraid. Vote for change, and vote for a better future."

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