

Violence, Scandals And Fugitives - Politics, Bosnian-Style

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Attacks on returnees, corruption scandals and political manoeuvring... Bosnia's elections are months away, but the campaigning seems to have started already.

Muslim refugees returning to their home village in the Bosnian Serb-held half of the country, woke up to the sound of explosions last week. Only few days later, federal police discovered a cache of weapons, explosives and ammunition big enough to arm a platoon or blow away half a village.

Now reports are emerging that the top Bosnian Serb war crimes suspect, Radovan Karadzic, was seen in the former Muslim eastern enclave of Srebrenica, making his first public appearance since 1996.

The Muslim member of the Bosnian tripartite presidency, Alija Izetbegovic is struggling against the rising corruption allegations. Meanwhile, Haris Silajdzic, co-premier of the Bosnian joint government and one of the most prominent Muslims after Izetbegovic, has secretly met with a key opposition figure, Social-Democratic leader Zlatko Lagumdzija.

Though elections are not scheduled until May next year, western diplomats and local analysts view the upsurge in incidents and political manoeuvring as the start of campaigning.

Muslim refugees who recently returned to their pre-war homes in the Serb-held villages near Gacko, in south-eastern Bosnia, were targeted several times in the last week. The most serious incident occurred on Wednesday night, when six 60 millimetre mortar rounds exploded near their homes. Nobody was injured and the returnees pledged such attacks would not scare them away from their houses.

During a random traffic control also near the southern town of Mostar only few days later, federal police discovered a van packed with weapons, explosives and ammunition. The driver managed to escape unidentified.

During the 1992-1995 Bosnian war, southern Bosnia was scene of some of the fiercest fighting among Bosnian Serbs, Croats and Muslims. Since the Dayton Peace Agreement ended large-scale hostilities, this region has remained one of the worst hot spots with random incidents and ethnic violence.

Now the number of incidents in the country is rising again. "It seems that the election campaigns have started early this year," a senior international official in Mostar says ironically.

An upsurge in ethnic violence has often heralded the beginning of an election campaign. Hard-liners in all ethnic groups have instigated incidents in order to remind their respective electorates that they can best protect their interests from the threat posed by the country's two other communities.

The violence is not the only sign that an election is in the offing. Sarajevo daily Dnevni Avaz reported that Muslim refugees visiting their pre-war homes in Srebrenica saw Radovan Karadzic holding a small public meeting there.

Fearing the arrest and extradition to the Hague War Crimes Tribunal, Karadzic has been living in hiding since 1996. According to the testimonies reported by Dnevni Avaz, Karadzic called on the Serb refugees

who are currently living in Srebrenica not to be fooled by international propaganda, i.e. not to leave Srebrenica and not to return to their own homes.

While international officials continue investigating this report, the Office of the High Representative says that preliminary findings indicate that a man named Radovan Karadzic did speak at an SDS meeting on August 19 in Srebrenica, but that this was not the notorious indictee. Instead, it was Radovan Marko Karadzic, a language teacher and low-ranking member of the party.

Nobody could confirm or deny whether the real Karadzic was there too, but some diplomats said they would not be surprised if Karadzic had reappeared, in an attempt to boost hard-line Serb parties, believed to be steadily losing power among the Bosnian Serb electorate.

Meanwhile, in the wake of The New York Times' article alleging large-scale corruption in Bosnia, two Sarajevo independent weeklies have launched investigations of the personal affairs of Izetbegovic, his son Bakir and some of their inner circle. Both Slobodna Bosna and Dani have published articles exposing alleged examples of corruption and crime among the Muslim leadership.

Corruption charges are not, however, the most serious problem facing Izetbegovic, since his political party, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), which rules the Muslim-dominated regions of Bosnia, seems to be crumbling.

The first high-level defector from the SDA was Bosnian co-Premier Haris Silajdzic who left the party and established his own in 1996. Although Silajdzic's Party For Bosnia and Herzegovina (SZBiH) subsequently formed a coalition with the SDA, the rift has not healed and further divisions between SDA moderates and hard-liners are now coming to light.

Some Sarajevo newspapers have reported rumours that another influential Muslim politician, federal Prime Minister Edhem Bicakcic is also planning to abandon the SDA and form his own party.

As a moderate technocrat, Bicakcic enjoys strong international support and his defection would be a major blow to Izetbegovic and the SDA. Western diplomats speculate that in order to keep his party together 73-year-old Izetbegovic might defy the years and stand again in the 2000 elections.

Meanwhile, the strongest Bosnian opposition party, the Social-Democratic Party (SDP) and its leader Zlatko Lagumdzija appear to be catching up with the early election preparations.

Last month the SDP became the first party based in the Muslim-Croat Federation to open offices in the Serb-dominated areas (See 'Breaking the Mould' by Edina Becirevic in BCR 70, August 27, 1999). Moreover, Sarajevo media report that in the past month, Lagumdzija has had several low-key meetings with Silajdzic.

Many western diplomats view Silajdzic and Lagumdzija as a potential winning team which could not only topple Izetbegovic's SDA but also help break the gridlock in Bosnian politics created by ethnic voting and nationalist parties in both entities.

The coming months will show whether international influence will be enough to persuade both Lagumdzija and Silajdzic to put aside their differences and form a coalition which could bring Bosnia into the 21st century, or bring the 21st century to Bosnia.

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