

US hails new ruling coalition

Tudjman's ultra-nationalist party defeated in Croatian elections

Mike Ingram
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Parliamentary elections in Croatia on Monday resulted in a victory for the centre-left coalition against the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatske Demokratske Zajednice—HDZ).

Following the death of its founder and leader Franjo Tudjman, the HDZ lost nine of eleven constituencies to the opposition coalition, made up of the Social Democratic Party (Socijaldemokratska Partija Hrvatske—SDP), headed by former Communist Party leader Ivica Racan, and the Social Liberals (Hrvatske Socijalno Liberalne Stranke—HSL), led by Drazen Budisa.

The precise dimensions of the HDZ defeat are not yet known due to a complex system of proportional representation and the need for fresh elections in some areas following allegations of ballot rigging. State television has predicted that the Racan-Budisa coalition will have 70 seats in a 152-seat parliament, meaning that they would need the support of a coalition of four other parties, which is projected to win 24 seats. This bloc of six parties would still not command the two-thirds of parliament needed to pass constitutional changes, such as diminishing the powers of the president. The HDZ would have 48 seats, after benefiting from the émigré vote.

The Social Democrats and Social Liberals are hoping for a victory in the January 24 presidential election. They are running Budisa as the joint SDP-HSL candidate. The HDZ have nominated former Foreign Minister Mate Granic—regarded as a moderate and Washington's favourite to replace Tudjman—as their presidential candidate.

Media reports drew attention to the apparent irony of the makeup of the opposition coalition leadership.

Budisa was jailed for his part in organising the 1971 "Croatian spring" protest movement. SDP leader Racan was at that time a rising star in the ruling Communist Party. He was party general secretary in 1991, when Croatia claimed independence from the Yugoslav federation.

Budisa and Racan are representative of a layer of aspiring bourgeois that came forward in the midst of the break-up of the Stalinist states throughout Eastern Europe. Their electoral victory has been welcomed in both Washington and Europe as a favourable alternative to the Tudjman regime. What both have in common is their willingness to do the bidding of the transnational corporations in offering up the Croatian working class as a source of cheap labour.

The independent paper *Jutarnji List* blamed the HDZ's "debacle" on "dissatisfaction with the living standards of a large part of the population, bitterness over corruption in the country, and complete incomprehension of why Croatia has become more isolated than Romania and Bulgaria". With unemployment at a record high of 20.4 percent and monthly salaries frozen at \$400, there was certainly mounting popular hostility to the regime of Tudjman. But the defeat of the HDZ was also helped along by the US and Europe.

In the Bosnian war of 1992-95 Tudjman was the principal victor because he acted as the political proxy for both the US and Germany. Croatia's invasion of the Krajina received substantial backing from Washington and Bonn. Germany financed the transformation of the HVO Croatian militia into one of the most well-equipped armies in Europe. Former US military officers were brought in to organise the offensive.

Following the Bosnian settlement, however, the West came to see Tudjman's nationalist ambitions as a destabilising factor in Balkan politics, while the pervasive corruption and nepotism of his regime were seen as obstacles to the requirements of international capital. Croatia was denied access to European Union (EU) funds, barred from NATO's Partnership for Peace programme and blocked from even initial talks on EU membership.

Had Tudjman not died there are indications that preparations were under way to engineer his removal. Towards the end of last year NATO troops raided several buildings in neighbouring Bosnia, claiming that employees of the University of Mostar's Agronomic Institute and an import inspection firm were really the intelligence experts of a clandestine and illicit network run from Croatia.

In the December 17 *Washington Post Foreign Service*, R. Jeffrey Smith wrote, "NATO officials say they have clear evidence that the Croatian government of Franjo Tudjman, who died last Friday, has been secretly paying millions of dollars a month to fund this network. Its aim, they say, was to support Bosnian Croat nationalists who oppose the return of Bosnian Muslims to Croat-dominated areas of the country, and thus keep alive the possibility that Croatia might ultimately be able to annex Bosnian territory."

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The Western powers seized the opportunity provided by Tudjman's death to engineer a political shift. The US and Europe both lent active support to the opposition forces against the HDZ and so brought together parties that were, at least ostensibly, at opposite ends of the political spectrum. As the *New York Times* of January 5 noted, "Washington urged unity on the opposition here [in Croatia] and provided significant advice and aid directly and indirectly. With this victory it is expected that Secretary of State Madeline K. Albright will make an early visit to Zagreb. That would be a sharp contrast to the low level of American diplomatic representation at Mr. Tudjman's funeral."

The election result was welcomed in the European press, with several newspapers expressing the hope that Serbian opposition groups will follow the example of Croatia. The German daily *Die Welt* editorialised, "The breakthrough mood in Croatia will perhaps spread to

the deeply paralysed Serb society. [Serbian] Dictator Slobodan Milosevic is now finally alone."

In Paris, *Le Figaro* said that Racan and Dudisa have prepared Croats for sacrifices to come in the fight to reduce 20 percent unemployment and rebuild an economy in shambles. *Libération* called Racan a figure from the past, but declared that he now represents Croatia's future.

In London, the *Financial Times* said that voters opted for "political and economic reform—and an end to prolonged international isolation". It urged the West to "offer generous support, including aid, trade, and investment" on the condition that the new government proved willing to resist over-spending and focused on market-oriented reforms.

European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana welcomed the result as paving the way for closer relations with Croatia. "I am confident that the future policies of Croatia will be clearly oriented towards Europe and European values," he said.

The former Stalinist leader Racan has pledged to cut the state budget by 17 percent, trim sales taxes and offer fiscal breaks to encourage investors.



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