

Milosevic opponents gain control of Yugoslav parliament and state TV

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Hundreds of thousands of people massed in the Serbian capital Belgrade on Thursday demanding the immediate resignation of President Slobodan Milosevic. Opposition demonstrators were attacked with tear gas outside the Federal Parliament, but burst through police lines using a bulldozer, smashing up furniture and setting the building alight.

Five police cars were set on fire and demonstrators took over the state-run television station. Late Thursday evening, Belgrade time, the official news agency, now in the hands of the insurgents, declared opposition leader Vojislav Kostunica to be the "president elect".

Two people are reported killed so far, as the government deployed riot troops, tanks and tear gas. Some police are reported to have joined the demonstrators. Dozens of people have been injured.

The mass demonstration was timed to coincide with an ultimatum by Kostunica, the victor in last Sunday's presidential election, insisting that Milosevic tend his resignation and admit that the September 24 ballot was rigged to prevent him securing more than 50 percent of the vote and automatically assuming office.

On Wednesday, the Constitutional Court had met to hear complaints by the opposition of electoral fraud. Opposition leaders, backed by the US and Western Europe, have rejected Milosevic's demand for a run-off election between Kostunica and himself.

However the ruling of the court, far from placating Milosevic opponents, fuelled their anger. The court acknowledged ballot irregularities and annulled parts of the contested presidential election, but ordered an entirely new vote. Kostunica, the United States, Britain, Germany and other Western governments condemned the court's decision outright, setting the stage for Thursday's events.

In the midst of the stormy events on Thursday, the

major Western powers issued new statements demanding that Milosevic quit. US President Bill Clinton praised the Yugoslav people for "trying to get their country back". Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair said of Milosevic, "Go now." In reply Milosevic, issued a pledge that his government would fight back "with all its powers".

Yesterday's events followed four days of rallies and protests throughout Serbia demanding Milosevic's resignation and raising the call for a general strike. The response to the strike appeal was smaller than anticipated by opposition leaders, but still confirmed the existence of widespread public anger against Milosevic's authoritarian regime. The most active social base for the opposition comes from Yugoslavia's student population, while older workers seemed more sceptical of its claims to represent a democratic alternative to Milosevic.

Some 50,000 students were active in protests in Belgrade, and rallies elsewhere in the country had varied crowds of 10,000 to 50,000, with Kostunica addressing the largest protests. In some cases police refused to act against protesters in an anticipation of Thursday's events. It was reported that the head of special police anti-terrorist units, Zivko Trajkovic, has been demoted and moved to a provincial town.

The opposition's greatest success was in winning the support of miners at the Kolubara mine in Lazarevac, 30 kilometres south of Belgrade, where 7,500 workers struck in defiance of government threats. Another 4,500 workers at the Kostolac mine, east of Belgrade, and 3,000 at Majdanpek in the southeast have also struck.

Milosevic took a defiant stance, despite high-level defections by some of his political allies and pro-opposition criticisms by sections of the official media, the Serbian Orthodox church and others in the ruling

layers who sensed a threat to their own position. On Monday, he made a television address to the nation focusing on the charge that the opposition movement was a puppet of the Western powers, and portraying himself as Yugoslavia's national saviour.

Milosevic said, "For a whole decade efforts have been under way to place the entire Balkans under the control of certain Western powers. Most of that work has been done by installing puppet governments in certain countries, by turning these countries into countries of limited sovereignty or depriving them of any sovereignty."

The opposition represented Western interests and its real boss was not Kostunica, he declared, but "the chairman of the Democratic Party", Zoran Djindjic, who had supported NATO's bombing campaign last year, allegedly stating at the time that Serbia should be "bombed for as many weeks as necessary to crush its resistance".

The government threatened to take "special measures" against "the organisers of these criminal activities," including the media. On Wednesday police arrested the head of the public transport trade union, Dragoljub Stosic. It announced its intention to arrest eleven organisers of the Kolubara miners' strike, as well as opposition politicians Nebojsa Covic and Boris Tadic, the deputy head of the Democratic Party. Special police units were despatched to Koubara, but were repelled by opposition supporters.

Washington and the European powers have pressed Russian President Vladimir Putin to apply pressure on Milosevic to step down. Any negotiated settlement, however, would have to offer Milosevic a way out. On Tuesday the UN human rights envoy to the former Yugoslavia, Jiri Dienstbie, proposed that Milosevic be guaranteed immunity from prosecution for war crimes, stating, "The real question is if we are more interested in Mr. Milosevic ... or in the future of 10 million Serbs and probably the whole Balkans."

Both UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook swiftly rejected Dienstbie's proposal. The US in particular sees Milosevic's removal and public humiliation as vital in demonstrating its power and authority over the Balkan region and justifying the claim that last year's war would eventually bring "democratic rule" to Serbia.

Washington has worked consistently to accomplish

this, playing the leading role in creating and funding the Democratic Opposition. Together, the US and Europe have provided close to \$80 million and the US has pencilled in over \$100 million more for the coming year. The US was instrumental in bringing the 18-party coalition behind a single candidate for the September 24 election, and the opposition programme was drafted by the National Endowment for Democracy, a government-subsidised front for US operations abroad.

Despite the mass character of the movement that has erupted against Milosevic, the Yugoslav working class have yet to find a political means through which to redress their legitimate democratic and social grievances. Over the past decade the Western powers and the rival nationalist cliques in Yugoslavia's former constituent republics—including Milosevic himself—have brought the Balkan peninsula only war and economic ruin.

As long as the opposition to Milosevic is controlled by the nationalist and pro-imperialist forces represented by Kostunica, Djindjic and their ilk, no genuine improvement for the masses of Yugoslavs can be expected.

If the signs that the police force is crumbling are repeated in the army and the security forces, Milosevic could find himself out of power. But the opposition movement is pledged to pursue pro-business policies that would further erode workers' living standards. Western promises of economic prosperity and democracy for all under these new masters would prove to be a chimera.



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