

Bosnian elections a setback for the West

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Elections in Bosnia have demonstrated the continuing dominance of nationalist and ethnic-based parties. Final results in the November 11 general election—originally expected November 17—have still not been announced. But there is every indication that they represent a significant setback for the Western powers, whose success in engineering the replacement of Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia by Vojislav Kostunica had encouraged them to believe they could secure a more compliant leadership in Bosnia.

Bosnia was divided into a Serb republic and a Muslim-Croat Federation under the terms of the November 1995 Dayton Accord, after three and a half years of war between its constituent peoples fostered by the rival cliques of nationalist politicians. The West had given its support to the Croatian regime of Franjo Tudjman and the Muslim leader Alija Izetbegovic against the Serbian nationalists led by Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia proper and Radovan Karadzic in the mainly Serb areas of Bosnia. Their aim was to encourage the break-up of the Yugoslav federation and so establish control over the Balkan region. The war claimed 250,000 lives and forced two million into exile.

As a result, politics has been dominated by hard-line ethnic parties ever since. Only about 10 percent of refugees have returned to their pre-war homes, despite the continued presence of 20,000 Western troops.

The Western powers had hoped to build support for more pliant leaders in both areas through the carrot and stick of threatening economic sanctions if a nationalist vote was cast and promises of greater investment should their desired result be achieved. US Ambassador Thomas Miller made it clear that Bosnian Serbs would lose tens of millions of dollars in aid if they voted for the nationalists. Wolfgang Petritsch, the Austrian diplomat who runs Bosnia, had also warned, that, "Another nationalist win in Bosnia-Herzegovina would

only see this potentially rich country isolated politically and economically".

With unemployment standing at over 40 percent in both ethnic cantons, this was a grave threat indeed. But it largely failed to achieve the desired result.

Just above 50 percent—2.5 million Bosnians—were registered to vote in the third general elections since the 1992-95 conflict, to elect representatives at state, entity, and canton levels. Early reports put the actual turnout much lower, however—just 20 percent for Croats, and between 35 and 45 percent for Muslims and Serbs.

The low turnout and a general distrust of Western-backed forces ensured the continued dominance of the nationalist parties.

In the Republika Srpska, the Serb Democratic Party (SDS), founded by Karadzic and now led by presidential candidate Mirko Sarovic, is easily ahead of the Western-backed sitting Prime Minister Milorad Dodik's Independent Social Democrats and Mladen Ivanic's Party of Democratic Progress. Dodik is widely blamed for the republic's economic difficulties. The extreme nationalists seem to have won the presidency in the Serb-run canton and may end up controlling the Serb regional legislature. The best the West can now hope for is that the eventual result necessitates some form of coalition and Dodik wins the presidency on the strength of the second preferences of Muslim and Croat voters as well as of non-nationalist Serbs.

The SDS's main nationalist rivals, the Radicals, were barred from standing after publicly advocating a greater Serbia.

In the Muslim-Croat federation, the Western powers had lent support to the multi-ethnic Social Democratic Party of Zlatko Lagumdžija, which fielded candidates in all regions. Its vote increased significantly, but not enough to topple the nationalist Croatian Democratic Union, or HDZ, led by Ante Jelavic and the Muslim nationalist Party for Democratic Action, or SDA—led by

Haris Silajdzic, Bosnian prime minister when the Dayton Accord was signed.

The HDZ held an unauthorised referendum on the day of the election asking Croats to support a demand for sovereignty as a possible precursor to re-establishing the wartime Bosnian Croat mini-state. Jelavic, who holds the Croats' seat in Bosnia's three-member presidency, has denounced NATO, the UN and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) forces in Bosnia as outdated figures whose authority is no longer recognised.

An HDZ candidate for the Bosnian national parliament and two for the Muslim-Croat Federation legislature were removed by the OSCE, which charged them for violating campaign financing rules by “deliberately and systematically” obstructing an OSCE audit. The seats will remain vacant.

Founded by Croatia's late President Franjo Tudjman, the Western powers had hoped that Tudjman's death and his government's replacement in January by a more pro-Western regime would curb the HDZ by removing its financial and political support.

The new Croatian President, Stipe Mesic, has called the referendum a failure and urged Bosnian Croats to co-operate with their fellow Bosnians. But this appears to have had little effect.

The Western powers were clearly dismayed. The UN's Jean-Marie Guehenno told the Security Council in New York that, “It had been hoped that this third set of general elections since Dayton would produce responsible local political authorities who would work constructively to consolidate a sovereign and multiethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina. Regrettably, this has not yet been fully achieved.”

Last week, political leaders from Bosnia gathered at Dayton Ohio, for a conference to mark the fifth anniversary of the accord, where US ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke called for the Dayton accord to be improved. Holbrooke said Bosnia should have a united army instead of the current forces divided between the country's three ethnic groups, or NATO would never be able to reduce its own forces without risking renewed conflict.

Noises have been made by the US indicating it will not continue to maintain forces in Bosnia indefinitely, particularly in the event of a Bush victory in the presidential elections. US Ambassador Thomas Miller

warned that Bosnia “is not an open-ended commitment”.

Also problematic for the West is the possible impact of the SDS victory on its relations with Kostunica in Serbia. His ruling Democratic Opposition of Serbia openly supported the SDS in Bosnia's Serb republic. Kostunica himself has a long record of support for Serbia's continued right to control its former Bosnian province and was once photographed carrying a rifle with Karadzic's forces.

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