After communal elections in Kosovo: new conflicts on the horizon

Justus Leicht, Peter Schwarz
2 November 2000

Western governments and media sources have jubilantly greeted the results of communal elections held in Kosovo last weekend. Reports emphasised the peaceful nature of the election and the high level of voter participation. Both the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the United Nations spoke of “passing the test of democratic maturity”.

Such estimations correspond less to political and social reality than the desire to retrospectively justify the military intervention by NATO and the transformation of Kosovo into a Western protectorate. Rather than resolving those outstanding issues that in the past have repeatedly led to violent clashes— the issue of the future status of Kosovo and the peaceful cohabitation of the various different peoples that have inhabited the region for centuries—the election has intensified them.

Voter participation consisted almost exclusively of the Albanian majority in Kosovo, which turned out in force for the election. Reports tell of Albanians often travelling long distances over rough terrain and then standing for hours at the election centres to vote. Most Albanians see the election as the first step towards the independence of Kosovo rather than a question of who occupies the town councils. Independence was the central theme of almost all of the Albanian parties taking part in the elections. Urgent local problems that are under the jurisdiction of the local councils—50 percent unemployment, a ruined infra-structure, education, health etc.—played virtually no role in the election.

In contrast to the Albanian population, the Serb minority largely abstained from the vote. Western politicians and media in the main accounted for this deficit by describing it as the result of desperate manoeuvres on the part of Serb nationalists. A spokesman for the European Union commission commented on Monday: “We greet the result and the violence-free conduct of the voting... it would have been much better if the Serbs had taken part in the election.” The head of the UN administration in Kosovo, Bernard Kouchner, declared in a tone of colonial high-handedness that he would personally appoint representatives for the Serb minority.

In fact the election boycott by the Serbs expresses that they saw no possibility of defending their democratic rights in a Kosovo dominated by Albanian nationalists, under conditions where over half of the original Serb population of 200,000 has been driven out of the province since it was occupied by NATO troops.

Other minorities living in Kosovo—Roma, Turks, Muslim Slavs, etc.—only took a very limited part in the election. As a rule they are barely mentioned in the media, because any reference to the many other different peoples living in the region would expose the stereotype encouraged by the Western media of “good” Albanians and “bad” Serbs.

Despite the prevailing mood for an independent Kosovo, the election result also makes clear that the Albanian population has had enough of the provocations and violent methods that are the hallmark of the extreme nationalists.

With just 60 percent of the votes cast, the “Democratic League of Kosovo” (LDK) under Ibrahim Rugova recorded an unexpectedly high election victory. The party was well in front of the “Democratic Party of Kosovo” (PDK), headed by the former leader of the Kosovo Liberation Army (UCK) Hashim Thaci, which won just 27 percent, and the “Alliance for the Future of Kosovo” with 8 percent, also led by a former KLA commander Ramush Haradinaj. In terms of the result Albanians have clearly rejected the Mafia-type structures and gangster methods of the KLA.

In the final analysis, this represents a blow to NATO, which deliberately encouraged the rise of Thaci and the KLA. NATO needed the KLA in order to fabricate a reason for going to war with the Serbs. This had proved to be difficult to organise with Rugova, who had led the nationalist opposition to Belgrade for 10 years, but always tended towards a compromise solution. This was also the reason why Thaci was personally ennobled and crowned “head of the Albanian resistance” by the US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright.

Although official US agencies had only shortly before assessed the KLA as a terrorist organisation, NATO provided it with arms whilst it provoked many of the bloody conflicts that led to exaggerated claim's of Auschwitz-type mass murder taking place in Kosovo. When Rugova suddenly popped up in Belgrade under curious circumstance, shook the hand of Milosevic in front of rolling TV cameras and called for an end to the war, the West dropped him totally.

After the change of government in Belgrade following the fall of Slobodan Milosevic, however, Rugova's return is not inconvenient for the Western powers. With his help they hope it will be possible to politically resolve the Kosovo problem and so stabilise the region. This is why they are now supporting him.

It is questionable, however, whether they can restrain the spirits they have set loose, i.e. whether the KLA is willing to concede the economic and political levers of power it presently holds. Kosovo's current security forces, in particular the “protection force” TMK, is practically identical to the former KLA which also dominates in the judicial system, administration and significant parts of the economy. Thaci and Haradinaj, the celebrated “contact partners” of NATO, are at the same time the godfathers of terror and criminal activities.

Through clenched teeth, Thaci's PDK has accepted defeat in the election but then rejected the OSCE's claim that the elections had been free and fair. A spokesman for the party put forward a nine-point dossier, protesting that if it had been adhered to the PDK would have won 40 percent. The party alleged that the LDK influenced voters with threatening or arrogant behaviour. In many places there was no genuine secret vote. Many of the votes for the PDK were declared invalid. “In Prizren and other named communes the PDK had its victory stolen away.”

It is true that the democratic credentials of Rugova's LDK leave much to be desired. From the beginning of the 1990s up until the war, the party monopolised social and political life. It represents the traditional layer of privileged Albanians who feel themselves threatened by the criminal

© World Socialist Web Site

social climbers of the KLA.

Like Thaci, Rugova has also publicly declared for Kosovo independence and said that the communal elections are the first step in this direction. Bujar Bukoshi, a leading member of the LDK, emphasised this point once more in an interview with *Deutschlandfunk*: " Kosovo is practically and de facto independent... resolutions are resolutions and the reality is somewhat different... Of course we are reckoning with the support of the international community to respect the will of Albanians regarding our fundamental right."

Up until now the Western powers have officially rejected independence for Kosovo on the basis of UN-Resolution 1244, contemplating instead a "substantial autonomy". There now appear to be indications of a shift from this position.

For some time it has been known that the head of the UN-administration, Bernard Kouchner, tends in favour of a solution along the lines of independence. Also the head of the UN-civilian administration, Tom Koenigs, recently supported Rugova's demand for Parliamentary and Presidential elections next year, which would inevitable constitute a step towards independence.

Now there are similar considerations being aired by the US government, a report in the British *Guardian* newspaper alleged on October 30. According to "a senior US official in Pristina, who spent last week with [US Ambassador to the UN Richard] Holbrooke", the US is in the course of altering its interpretation of UN Resolution 1244. The *Guardian* article continued: "US government lawyers spent the past few weeks looking at the resolution in detail and they concluded that it did not rule out independence." The source justified the change with the fact that all of the Albanian parties were for independence, the Albanians had established their own legal and administrative systems and—the height of cynicism—most of the Kosovo Serbs had already left the province.

An independent Kosovo would have far-reaching implications for the entire region. In the first place the existence of two neighbouring Albanian states would immediately pose the question of their joining together, as well as throwing up the issue of the fate of Albanian minorities in Greece and Macedonia. Macedonia in particular threatens to become the battlefield for new bloody, ethnic conflicts. To prevent such a development was up until now the reason why the Western powers have always ruled out independence for Kosovo, although the entire intervention on the part of the West has resulted in establishing the preconditions for such a move. New tensions with Russia, which has always rejected such a development, are also on the cards.

Secondly, such a solution is equally unacceptable for the new Western backed government in Belgrade. Yugoslav president Vojislav Kostunica has welcomed the victory of "moderate forces" in Kosovo, but has refused to recognise the communal elections and insisted on the retention of Resolution 1244. At the end of its article the *Guardian* concluded: "The US is unlikely to go public on its policy switch in the near future in case it undermines Yugoslavia's new democratically elected president".

Kostunica's stand arises logically out of his entire policy. In order to impose, as anticipated, a policy of economic liberalism on the Serb people, he requires the support of right-wing nationalists. For the latter, however, loyalty to Serbia's claims on the entire region (dating back to the historic battle of Amselfeld) is an integral part of their programme.

The entire intervention by the Western powers over the past 10 years has gone along these lines: in order to break up Yugoslavia and open up the country to international capital, the Western powers have supported nationalists like Franjo Tudjman in Croatia, Alijah Izetbegovic in Bosnia and—prior to him being declared a foe—Milosevic. For their part these nationalist leaders unleashed an ethnic wildfire that NATO was called upon to extinguish. NATO's military intervention only served to deepen national wounds, leading to new bloodbaths. There is no indication that this vicious circle will be broken.

The new Serb leadership of Kostunica and Zoran Djindjic have little in the way of fundamental differences with Milosevic, who they have repeatedly accused in the past of "selling out Serbia's national interests". First stop by Kostunica in his maiden visit to Bosnia last week was not the capital Sarajevo, but the party of Radovon Karadjic, the Serb ultra-nationalist. In 1998 Kostunica had posed before cameras in Kosovo armed with a Kalashnikov and surrounded by Serb paramilitary troops.

The fact that this man is now being courted from Washington to Brussels and Moscow has not exactly contributed to weakening Albanian nationalism. Up until now Ibrahim Rugova has rejected talks with Kostunica naming a host of pre-conditions. Amongst other demands he is calling for the release of all Albanian prisoners and for the clarification of the fate of Albanians who "disappeared" during the war. In addition Rugova calls for Serb war-criminals to be handed over, a formal apology for the "massacre" of Kosovo-Albanians as well as recognition of the "right of self-determination" for Kosovo. One of the reasons for his hardline with regard to the demands is to prevent accusations from the KLA (now PDK) similar to those raised during the war that Rugova was a "traitor" or "collaborator."

At the moment the Western powers tend towards dragging out a decision regarding the final status of Kosovo. Kouchner wants to begin talks with Yugoslavia over the issue on November 24. Whether Albanian representatives will participate in the talks is not clear. A decision cannot be put off forever and, however it turns out, the result contains new potential for conflict.

Should Kosovo become independent this would undermine the new government in Belgrade. If independence is refused then new conflicts threaten to erupt in Kosovo. The *New York Times* of October 29 warned: "So the situation in Kosovo is likely to become more explosive, not less, ensuring the need for NATO troops to remain for a long time to come. The reason? Independence is likely to become not just a dream deferred, but denied. And as the contradiction between Western verbal encouragement for Albanian self-determination and its opposition to independence becomes clear, the potential for violence against NATO troops will grow."

On the basis of the policies being pursued by the Western governments, a genuine democratic solution for the Balkans is excluded. This requires a completely different perspective—the unification of working peoples of all nationalities against the ruling elites and their international backers and the construction of a Socialist Federation of the Balkans.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site