Arms decommissioning central to election in Northern Ireland

Mike Ingram
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With all the talk of a Labour landslide in the June 7 general election, it would be easy to miss the fact that in Northern Ireland the result is much less certain—with potentially serious consequences on both sides of the Irish border.

If the elections to Westminster are seen as a referendum on Labour's four years in office, then in Northern Ireland they will be taken as a referendum on the three year old Northern Ireland peace agreement.

Despite much talk following the creation of the Northern Ireland Assembly last year of a return to the "bread and butter issues" of "normal" political life, the elections have brought to the fore all the issues left outstanding from the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. Most notably that of the decommissioning of weapons by the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

The issue was temporarily shelved in May last year in order to allow the Assembly to convene. Following a resignation threat by Ulster Unionist Party leader and First Minister David Trimble, which threatened to bring down the entire Agreement, the IRA agreed to put its arms "beyond use" by June 1 this year. With a resolution to the arms question demanded prior to the June 7 vote, Trimble has again played the resignation card in the hope that he can ensure that the pro-Agreement wing of the Unionists win out in the Westminster elections.

Earlier in the week, Trimble said he would resign on June 1 if the IRA fails to make progress on arms decommissioning by that date. His choice of words is significant, since "progress" can be all things to all men.

In varying tones, most of the press in Britain and Ireland complimented Trimble on his actions, recognising that he was making the best of a bad situation. The *Irish Times* pointed out that unlike in February, this time around Trimble has pledged only his own resignation, not that of his colleagues in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Trimble could still be re-elected as First Minister even if his post-dated resignation was to take effect.

"The effect is to throw the British and Irish governments at least a six-week lifeline—the period designated by the Assembly's rules for the election of a new First Minister—in which to try to resolve the outstanding issues of decommissioning, demilitarisation, policing and the operation of the institutions of the Belfast Agreement," The *Times* comments.

Trimble's first concern is to retain the nine out of 18 Unionist seats held by the UUP in Westminster. Anything less could be seen as a rejection of the UUP's pro-Agreement stance and would strengthen the hand of the anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP).

The *Irish Independent* say the resignation move "has little to do with republicans who know well enough what it is they have committed themselves to. Rather it is directed to patch the holes in the UUP and must be read in that context, and as an attempt to reconcile some anti-agreement unionists and to hold off the challenge of the DUP."

The DUP has promised to make the election a referendum on the peace process. Party leader Ian Paisley claimed voters would face a choice of whether Northern Ireland "goes down the road of the republican agenda or whether they will stop and seek a way to renegotiate our position."

Paisley added, "We are coming to a hard fact that the ordinary individuals are going to the ballot box to pass their verdict on the surrender process of which he (Trimble) has been commander-in-chief."

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It is by no means certain that Trimble's strategy will work. So widespread has been the talk of losses for the UUP that the *Independent* commented: “Trimble has one thing in common with [Britain's Conservative Party leader] William Hague in that anything less than disaster in the election will be regarded as a success. Since all around him have been predicting meltdown for months, anything less will be a sort of triumph. Nevertheless, the UUP has more seats at risk than any other party. SDLP, DUP and Sinn Fein are all likely to hold on to theirs.”

The paper concludes: “On a good day for Trimble there could be four (seats) lost and two gained but that would be stretching it a bit.”

For their part Sinn Fein have done little to help Trimble. During Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams' campaign as MP for West Belfast he made a strong assertion of republican interest: “There are going to be negotiations after the elections. They are going to be immediately the counting is over. So ask yourself who are the tightest negotiators? Who are people who are most imaginative? Who has worked with all the parties to work the agreement?

“Sinn Fein has. We want people to take ownership of the negotiations, to strengthen the hands of the republican negotiators and send a message on policing, the equality agenda, demilitarisation and a clear signal of the right to self-determination.”

Of Trimble Adams said he was “mystified by what he is trying to achieve by this threat to resign. It makes the elections irrelevant.” He added that it was now up to the British and Irish governments and Prime Minister Tony Blair in particular to stand up to the Ulster Unionist leader and to tell him that “this is as good as it gets.”

As both unionists and republicans seek to rally their own core of supporters, it can only drive the two sides further apart and give added instability to the already fragile political institutions ushered in by the Good Friday Agreement.

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