

# Elections confirm popular hostility towards Kosovo Liberation Army

Tony Robson  
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The most significant feature of November's elections for the new assembly in Kosovo is the continued failure of the political successors of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) to win any substantial support at the ballot box.

The Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), under former KLA leader Hashim Thaci, received 25.5 percent of the vote, similar to its performance in last October's municipal elections. The Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK), headed by Ramush Hajredinaj, another former KLA leader, won just 7.8 percent of the vote. Both parties trailed way behind the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) of Ibrahim Rugova, the oldest established Albanian nationalist party, identified as leading a non-violent campaign for separation. The LDK emerged as the outright winner with 46.3 percent of the vote, but this margin is well short of the majority it requires within the new government.

The Western media has hailed the result as a victory for moderation and proof that a maturing democracy is taking shape in the Yugoslav province, which now exists as a NATO protectorate. However, the body responsible for supervising the elections—the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe—avoided such bold assertions and instead downgraded its usual standard for internationally supervised elections from “free and fair” to “legitimate and credible”. This is in recognition of the ethnic hatred that continues to pervade the province, where Serb and non-Albanian minorities do not enjoy freedom of movement for fear of violent attacks.

Any attempt to credit the Western powers for the extremists poor showing at the ballot box is sheer hypocrisy, given the fact that they played the primary role in promoting the KLA in the first place and have continued to bolster the paramilitaries within the protectorate since its establishment.

At the Rambouillet talks in February 1999, the US sidelined Rugova and insisted that KLA commander-in-chief Thaci head the Kosovar negotiating team. This was combined with the ultimatum that the Serbian government of Slobodan Milosevic surrender all sovereignty to NATO.

America's aim was to create a provocation that would

provide them with a pretext to go to war. The KLA then served as a proxy for NATO in its 79-day war against Yugoslavia. Afterwards, the US set up the KLA as the dominant force in the province.

There have been three different forms of post-war government in Kosovo—the KLA provisional government (PGK), the LDK government based upon the parallel elections of 1998 and the United Nations interim administration (UNMIK). The Western powers began to put together an administration under their control, which allotted key positions to the KLA. The latter had taken advantage of its military exploits to impose its rule in 23 of the province's 30 municipalities, taking over state enterprises and the running of public services including hospitals and schools. The KLA, along with the five other opposition parties to Rugova's LDK, were given international recognition by the major powers. This was exemplified by the invitation extended to KLA representatives to attend the Balkan Stability Pact forum in July 1999, while the LDK were excluded. The KLA were also given a controlling voice on the UN-sponsored Kosovo Transitional Council.

In the municipal elections last October, however, the LDK became the main beneficiary of the discontent that had arisen at this attempt to install the KLA into positions of authority. While independence remained the overriding sentiment amongst ethnic Albanian voters, there was growing opposition to the KLA's criminal activities and Mafia-style politics. (See: After communal elections: new conflicts on the horizon).

This was despite the best efforts of the US to sanitise the political image of the KLA. In the run-up to the elections, Thaci, in his role as leader of the newly formed PDK was given a hero's welcome in America. He visited the UN Headquarters, met with officials from the State Department and was an honoured guest at the Democratic Party Convention. While the mainstream media paid little attention to this tour, it was heavily promoted by the *Voice of America* radio station, whose principal audience is Europe, in order to bolster Thaci's credibility as a

statesmanlike figure.

While the PDK has failed to increase its standing via the ballot box, one of the main ways in which it has perpetuated its influence has been through its dominance of the Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC). Described as a reserve National Guard, the KPC was set-up under the auspices of UNMIK. Giving the KLA cadre a central role in the KPC was described as the “demilitarisation” of the guerrilla outfit. However, while the deadline for handing over weapons were continually deferred and new caches of arms continued to be discovered—leading to conflicts between NATO’s K-FOR “peace keeping” troops and the KLA—5,000 of the paramilitary organisation’s estimated 30,000 membership have been absorbed into the KPC reserve force.

UNMIK appointed former KLA commander Agim Ceku to be the KPC’s Chief of Staff. Ceku is implicated in the ethnic cleansing of Serbs whilst serving with the Croatian forces during the military offensives in Medak in 1993 and the Krajina in 1995. Evidence to this effect was leaked from an internal report submitted to The Hague tribunal prior to NATO’s military intervention in Kosovo.

A report submitted to the UN Secretary General last year said that the KPC was responsible for “criminal activities—killings, ill-treatment/torture, illegal policing, abuse of authority, intimidation, breaches of neutrality and hate-speech.” This is backed up by a number of sources. The *Economist* noted last November: “Foreigners and locals alike complain that UNMIK and KFOR have gone soft on the local gangsters to avoid a backlash against their presence. Certainly, members of the local police and Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC), a civil-defence force, both staffed in large part by the former KLA fighters, have been implicated in all sorts of shady dealing, as have many well-known ex-KLA politicians. Late last year, for example, UNMIK police arrested Idriz Brahimi, a KPC leader, on five counts of murder and torture. Another prominent former guerrilla was arrested on weapons charges, but later released without explanation. In private, UN officials argue that it is better to keep such thugs uniformed, organised and busy than underground, disenfranchised and bitter.”

Last August the military journal *Jane’s* stated: “UNMIK is not handling matters particularly well. The decision to create the Kosovo Defence Force (TMK), which employs a number of former KLA guerrillas, as a supposedly ‘civilian’ emergency task force merely perpetuated the core of the KLA under cover of a legitimate body.”

The KLA, therefore, remains a force in the land thanks to Western sponsorship and despite the evident hostility of the majority of ethnic Albanians and the hatred of ethnic Serbs and other minorities. Two-thirds of the Serb population were driven out of the province by the KLA, under the noses of K-

FOR troops. Most of the 100,000 Serbs that remain live in enclaves guarded by NATO forces, with over half of these residing north of the river Ibar in the divided town of Metrovica. According to one source, although Serbs and other minorities represent only 10 percent of the population, they account for 50 percent of murder victims. More than five Serbs are shot, blown-up or beaten to death every month.

In the November elections, both the PDK and the AAK failed to break out of the confines of what have become their rural fiefdoms. The parties and their leaders are associated with the bulk of criminal activity that has flourished in the protectorate. An estimated four to eight tonnes of heroin are thought to pass through Kosovo and neighbouring Serbia and Albania every month. The province is also the transit route for the smuggling of guns, cigarettes, petrol, stolen cars and forged documents. The split between Hajredinaj and Thaci is originally believed to be over the control of petrol stations.

While these gangster elements clash over who controls the booty, the vast majority of the population is slipping further into poverty. Nationalism is promoted to the exclusion of all social issues in a province where unemployment runs at between 50 to 60 percent.

While Rugova’s LDK won the election, their slender majority means that they will have to look to either the PDK or AAK to form a coalition. During the elections, all three Kosovar-Albanian parties tried to outdo each other by presenting themselves as the most determined champions of independence. Although the political scene continues to be dominated by nationalist demagogues, there are signs that a significant section of voters feel disenfranchised as a result. The proportion of registered voters taking part in November’s elections as compared with those last October declined from 78 percent to 63 percent.



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