

Kosovo: can sharing of power ever work? ; There is increasing marginalisation of moderates on both the Albanian and Serb sides, writes John O'Brennan
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Abstract

After a triumphant entry to Kosovo as the liberators of the Albanians, the perception gradually developed of a neo-colonial occupying force, directed by "the internationals", the western bureaucrats charged with reconstituting Kosovo as a functioning democracy. In the face of chronic unemployment and unleavened poverty, local views of the "internationals" have grown profoundly negative. The marked differentials in salaries and living standards, allied to widespread perceptions of corruption on the part of the new ruling elite, have rendered the "internationals" a much less neutral (and thus less effective) player in the political process. The assassination of the prime minister, Zoran Djindjic, one year ago plunged Serbia into a political crisis which reinforced Serb insecurity and weakened the hand of democratic forces. The coming Serbian presidential election is likely to be won by the ultra-nationalist Radical party which scored 28 per cent of the vote in the general election before Christmas and has been making much political capital out of the impotence of the Serb government in the face of the ethnic cleansing of their brethren in Kosovo.

The difficulty lies in reconstituting Kosovo as a practical issue of politics in preference to an emotional national attachment. Slavenka Drakulic, a liberal Croatian intellectual, has recently published an extraordinary study of the detainees being held by the International War Crimes Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia. There, at the Scheveningen detention unit in The Hague, Serb, Croat and Muslim indictees mix freely, share a common language, work out at the gym together and swap news and gossip from home.

Full Text

Burning churches, braying mobs, senseless sectarian murder and an international presence patently struggling to contain the carnage. In an environment where the cigarette-lighter has become once again a weapon of mass expulsion the Balkans has returned to international attention. And for all the wrong reasons.

In a grotesque reverse image of 1999, Serb communities have been subjected to a systematic campaign of ethnic cleansing by Albanian provocateurs.

The upsurge in violence is rooted in the interaction of three separate but inter-related factors. The first and most important is the tension arising out of Kosovo's unresolved and quite ambiguous constitutional status. The second is the growing Albanian disenchantment with the ruling UNMIK administration.

Finally, there is the poisonous legacy of the past and the role played by political elites on both sides of the divide. Each of these factors has contributed to the escalation of tensions. The UN Security Council Resolution 1244 of June 10th, 1999, effectively established Kosovo as a temporary western protectorate under the authority of UNMIK. The province was formally recognised as part of Yugoslavia.

But it was clear from the outset that some sort of independent Albanian state would emerge in a "final settlement". With the Albanian population constituting a nine-to-one majority in the province, an overwhelming mandate for independence could be the only possible outcome in a future referendum.

Yugoslavia has now disappeared and been replaced by an artificial entity called the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro which few observers expect to survive once independence referendums are triggered in each jurisdiction. Thus the prospect of a further break-up of the successor state to Yugoslavia itself promotes the idea of an ethnically demarcated and independently constituted Kosovo.

Whilst UNMIK hopes centred on the provision of a space where an inter-ethnic dialogue could be fostered, in reality Albanians and Serbs are now further apart than ever.

The Panglossian policy choice of UNMIK and the EU has been to encourage democratic institution-building whilst continually refusing to address the issue of final status talks.

Albanian frustration with this has grown steadily and now threatens to wreck the fragile post-1999 political compact. In this political vacuum, dissatisfaction with the occupying forces has grown.

After a triumphant entry to Kosovo as the liberators of the Albanians, the perception gradually developed of a neo-colonial occupying force, directed by "the internationals", the western bureaucrats charged with reconstituting Kosovo as a functioning democracy. In the face of chronic unemployment and unleavened poverty, local views of the "internationals" have grown profoundly negative. The marked differentials in salaries and living standards, allied to widespread perceptions of corruption on the part of the new ruling elite, have rendered the "internationals" a much less neutral (and thus less effective) player in the political process.

The goal of the political process, as in other post-conflict polities such as Northern Ireland, has centred on building trust between the communities.

This has not been made any easier by the increased marginalisation of moderates on both the Albanian and Serb sides. It is extremists who now call the shots, sharing as they do a common aim: to scupper negotiations between the Serb government in Belgrade and the Albanian-dominated government in Pristina.

For some Albanians independence remains desirable only as a stepping-stone to the real goal, the unification of all lands populated by Albanians within a greater Albania. But even if that goal is not widely shared, Albanian enthusiasm for power-sharing has diminished

markedly.

In Kosovo's first free parliamentary elections in November 2001 all its Albanian parties campaigned on an independence platform.

There is clear evidence that last week's violence against local Serb communities was organised and systematic. Balkan specialists see it as a form of pre-emptive action on the part of some Albanian groups, that is, to ethnically cleanse as many areas as possible of Serbs before moving to a final settlement which will limit the geographic concentration of Serbs to a handful of cantons in the north. It is a very Balkan logic predicated on an ingrained belief that violence and action are demonstrably preferable to dialogue and compromise. Last week's demonstrations in Belgrade point to the depth of feeling among Serbs on the issue. Kosovo is the spiritual essence of "celestial Serbia", the site of its most important Orthodox churches and the locus of the foundation myth of the modern Serb nation.

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It is extraordinarily dispiriting to encounter (as I did on a recent visit to once-cosmopolitan Belgrade) even liberal young Serbs who still hold to ideas about "eternal Kosovo" and its central place in their cognitively constituted Serbia.

Albanians are routinely depicted as terrorist Untermenschen and criminal reprobates, unworthy of a state of their own. Ultimately Serbia will have to face the fact that some form of divorce is necessary.

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Drakulic, in an ironic reference to Tito-era Yugoslavia, describes the atmosphere as one of "brotherhood and unity", where ethnic differences are put aside.

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