

Kosovo: A Prime Minister with a Kalashnikov

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Global Research, December 13, 2004

Der Spiegel 18 June 2005

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Crimes against Humanity](#)

In-depth Report: [THE BALKANS](#)

On December 3, former Kosovo Liberation Army commander Ramush Haradinaj, became prime minister of occupied Kosovo.

He stands accused of murdering 67 Serbs and ordering the deaths of 267 others. No matter: he became prime minister of Kosovo two weeks ago. But his reign, it seems, may be a short one. The war crimes tribunal in The Hague, and the Serbs, are on his tail. [Editor's note: The KLA has never been indicted by the ICTY for war crimes and it is unlikely that The Hague tribunal, which is a kangaroo court will pursue the matter]

A decision on Haradinaj's indictment will probably be made in the very near future, but the tribunal's investigation will likely play a lesser role than anticipated. As it turns out, the Americans are interested in Haradinaj acting as their partner at the status negotiations for Kosovo.... -[Haradinaj] has been one of the US government's closest allies ever since the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia. In fact, he was already the White House's top pick as the new leader of Kosovo's ethnic Albanians a few months after the war ended. The US government wanted Haradinaj to replace former fellow KLA fighter Hashim Thaci as the international negotiating partner in Kosovo after Thaci was discredited for his shady past.

He's a man who made a name for himself with his hand-to-hand combat skills and his ability to handle a Kalashnikov rifle. He was famous among his supporters as a tough-as-nails rebel commander during the war in the southern Serbian countryside.

But then the Kosovo international peacekeeping force, KFOR, took over in 1999. Ramush Haradinaj, commander of the KLA until then, quickly shed his guerilla image, traded in his fatigues for tailored suits and designer ties, founded his own political party and, sitting comfortably in a heavy, dark green leather chair, announced: "I will be the president or prime minister of Kosovo, because I represent hope and the future of my people."

Haradinaj's second coming became reality on December 3, when the 36-year-old ethnic Albanian became prime minister of the troubled province. His Alliance for the Future of Kosovo, which emerged from the October elections as the third-largest party in Kosovo's parliament [receiving only 8% of the vote], entered into a ruling coalition with the Democratic League – the party of Kosovan President Ibrahim Rugova.

Kosovo feuding political parties

According to the local rumor mill, one of Rugova's strongest reasons for entering into this alliance had to do with security. It's an unlikely coalition, especially when one considers Rugova's strained relationship with Haradinaj. Since the war in Kosovo ended, more than 70

murders are said to have been committed in three of the province's regions, Decani, Klina and Pec, and each of these cases has been linked to a political blood feud between the two camps; the majority of the victims were members of either Haradinaj's or Rugova's party. In 2002, a court sentenced Haradinaj's brother, Daut, to five years in prison for his alleged role in the murders of four ethnic Albanians considered to be supporters of Rugova.

But the bloody-hands reputation of the new Kosovan head of state, once a volunteer with the Yugoslav People's Army, isn't limited to the power of his fists and his occasional threats to strip his opponents naked, tie them to stakes and carry them through the streets of Kosovo's capital, Pristina.

The war crimes tribunal in The Hague has been investigating war crimes allegedly committed by the KLA for some time now. In November, Haradinaj, called the "Fist of God" by his followers during the war, spent two days testifying before the tribunal's investigators in Pristina. Haradinaj, it turned out, was himself the subject of an investigation into war crimes he allegedly committed in 1998 and 1999.

Prime minister with blood on his hands

Belgrade, in particular, claims to have uncovered incriminating evidence against Haradinaj. According to media reports in the Serbian capital, Kosovo's new prime minister killed 67 Serbs himself and, as commander of the KLA in the Decani region, ordered the extermination of another 267 victims. The government in Belgrade is outraged and, in light of Haradinaj's appointment to the office of prime minister, has threatened to boycott future talks with Pristina.

The United Nations administration isn't impressed. The head of the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), Soeren Jessen-Petersen, rejected the Serbian government's demand for Haradinaj's removal from office. Haradinaj, says Jessen-Petersen, was voted into office "legitimately and democratically."

A mildly irritated Javier Solana, the European Union's High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, has complained about an "inconvenient person" who is unnecessarily complicating the situation. But Haradinaj can be assured of the UN administration's goodwill as long as he continues to express his support for a future decentralization of Kosovo to benefit its remaining Serb population and to strive for "good neighborly relations" with Belgrade by guaranteeing a multi-ethnic society. The UN administration has also been tolerant of Haradinaj's promises of independence for Kosovo by 2006, as well as of his appointment of former communists as his advisors.

Nonetheless, many believe that the new prime minister's term in office could end up being shorter than his former career as a rebel fighter. The German ambassador to Serbia, Kurt Leonberger, has already warned that Haradinaj will be expected to "surrender voluntarily, notwithstanding his position as prime minister, the minute he is indicted by the Hague tribunal."

The US backs Haradinaj

A decision on Haradinaj's indictment will probably be made in the very near future, but the tribunal's investigation will likely play a lesser role than anticipated. As it turns out, the Americans are interested in Haradinaj acting as their partner at the status negotiations for

Kosovo planned for next year, and he won't do them much good behind bars. Washington hopes that Haradinaj's former role in the militant wing of the KLA will give him enough credibility to convince his fellow Kosovans of the need for unpleasant compromises.

Besides, the ethnic Albanian, who, as the eldest of seven children, emigrated to Switzerland at the age of 21, where he first worked as a gymnastics coach and nightclub bouncer before joining the KLA as a weapons buyer, has been one of the US government's closest allies ever since the NATO bombardment of Yugoslavia.

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Before this could occur, however, the "Fist of God" struck once again. In May 2000, he got into a fight with Russian KFOR troops. A short time later, Haradinaj was severely injured in a gun battle with ethnic Serbs, and was flown to the US military hospital in Landshut, Germany.

Haradinaj apparently emerged from the incident as bold as ever. Last week he announced that he has no qualms about visiting Belgrade. The Serbs were quick to issue a comeback: Haradinaj would be more than welcome in their capital. In fact, they've already issued a warrant for his arrest.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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