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Haradinaj out: Kosovo reshuffled or unruffled?

The Prime Minister of Kosovo, Ramush Haradinaj, stepped down the 19th of July. The decision came after he was summoned by the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office (KSC), an EU-funded court established in 2015 to investigate alleged crimes committed by members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA/UCK), the Albanian guerrilla that fought against the Serbian forces during Kosovo war in 1998-1999 and at the same time was involved into a bloody internecine conflict until 2000. Haradinaj, one of the most powerful KLA military commanders, is suspected for war crimes, although the KSC, which functions under Kosovo law but employ international staff, has not indicted him so far.

Years ago, Haradinaj was accused by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) for war crimes against Serbs and Albanians regarded as collaborators or rivals. Originally, he was convicted, but then judges acquitted him. Trials he faced at the ICTY, whose mandate expired in 2017, were controversial due to reported intimidation or elimination of witnesses.

The Kosovar Prime Minister, who leads the Alliance for the future of Kosovo (AAK), a junior party in the ruling coalition, went to The Hague on July 25. Invoking the right to remain silent, he did not answer any questions made by prosecutors. To explain his resignation, he said that he did want to go in The Hague as a private citizen, to preserve Kosovo's institutions honour.

Haradinaj's resignation paves the way to snap elections. His decision to step down could be a calculated move, some commentators in Pristina argue. Divisions and rivalries have weakened the coalition. Since months, there are rumours about its collapse. It is important to keep into account that the government majority was weak since the beginning of the legislature (September 2017), just one seat. In the meantime, Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination) the strongest party in the Assembly (Kuvend) lost 12 members to the new Group of the Independent Deputies (GDP), plus one who went back to the AAK, her original party led by Haradinaj; giving the majority another seat in a 120-seat strong parliament.

Nevertheless, the results delivered by the government are poor. Talks with Serbia are frozen, the big promise made by Haradinaj when he was appointed in 2017 (free visa for Kosovars to travel to Europe in 90 days) is unfulfilled, corruption is still very high, and wages are not going up. Haradinaj chose to act as a responsible patriot to cover up the bad performance made by his government and re-energize himself, some analysts say. He will be once again the AAK candidate for the premiership.

Haradinaj is still praised for what he did as a KLA commander, but it is hard to think that people will take street to support him in case he will face a trial, as it happened in the past. Most of Kosovo's citizens are very young, and many of them have not experienced war times. They appreciate those who fought to give Kosovo independence, but their main concerns are jobs, opportunities and visas. Among the youth, there is a huge disappointment towards political parties, perceived as corporations selling benefits to customers (voters) and getting their own pockets well lined up. More than a national hero, Ramush Haradinaj is viewed by young Kosovars as a member of an élite who seized their homeland.

It is difficult to predict who will win snap elections. It is reasonable to expect a low turnout, as it was in in 2017 (41%). Telling how Haradinaj's resignation will affect talks with Serbia is a unpredictable as well. Haradinaj strongly opposes a land swap proposed by the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic and supported by Hashim Thaci, Kosovo's president and founder of the Democratic Party (PDK), the strongest force in the coalition. In accordance to Vucic's idea, Serbia will recognize Kosovo and annex its north strip of land, mainly populated by Serbs, compensating Kosovo with some territories in southern Serbia where the Albanians are the ethnic majority.

If the KSC will charge Haradinaj for war crimes, or if snap elections will turn into a disaster for him and his party, Thaci could play this card one again, should PDK will win a large amount of votes. To the contrary, if Haradinaj will be a king maker in the new Parliament, the land swap, rejected by France, Germany and Russia, could definitely fade away.

To add some more uncertainty in this scenario, it should not be forgotten that snap elections are expected also in Serbia (probably by late 2019 or Spring 2020, according to Vucic's statements). Likely, nobody will seat at the negotiating table or do something significant in the coming months.

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