

ELECTIONWATCH

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA



Bosnia and Herzegovina Pre-Election Watch: October 2010 General Elections

The citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) will head to the polls on October 3 in what has been described by many in the international community as a crucial election. The outcome will likely play an important role in determining the direction of the country's European Union accession process. At the least, citizens would like to see these elections result in a government that ends the political gridlock that has stifled economic growth and legislative initiatives for the past five years.

The last few months have provided little reason for optimism. Politicians eschew issue-based dialogue in favor of divisive, ethnic rhetoric that plays on the nationalistic fears and passions of citizens. While the official campaign started on September 3, ruling political elites began aggravating ethnic tensions months ago. Bosnian Serb leaders threatened Bosnia's unity with calls for an independence referendum; Bosnian Croats raised the possibility of further dividing the country by establishing a third regional entity for themselves; meanwhile, Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) insist on greater centralization and unification.

BiH's divisive atmosphere reflects the shortcomings of the Dayton Peace Accord that ended the country's 1992-95 war. While the accord was successful in ending the hostilities, its political framework planted the seeds for the ethnic divisions that exist today. Under the peace agreement, BiH was divided into two autonomous regions - the Serb dominated Republika Srpska (RS) and the Bosniak-Croat Federation. The two entities are linked by weak central institutions, while much of the real power is vested in the Office of the High Representative (OHR), an international institution established to oversee the implementation of the Dayton agreement. The unusual system created by the Dayton Accord, coupled with the weakness of the national government, has only served to reinforce ethnic fault lines and generate resentment.

BiH recently failed to uphold a mandate from the European Court of Human Rights to amend its constitution to end the electoral discrimination of the country's minority groups before calling elections. As it stands, BiH's constitution allows only Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs to run for the parliament and the presidency. Serbs from the Federation and Bosniaks and Croats from the RS are also banned from running for posts that are reserved for their respective ethnic groups in the central institutions.

Overview of the Structure of National and Entity Government

Government in BiH

The 1995 Dayton Accord established a complex system of government for BiH. The constitution guarantees political representation for each of the three **constituent peoples**

(ethnic Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs). In addition to executive, legislative and judicial structures, Dayton also established the OHR, a representative of the international community who holds certain executive powers. While the OHR continues to possess significant authority, it has been used less frequently in recent years. BiH is divided into two **entities** with specified powers: the **Federation of BiH** (made-up of mainly ethnic Bosniaks and Croats) and the **RS** (mainly ethnic Serbs).

National Government

The national executive branch is a three-member **presidency**. Each of the three constituent peoples directly elects a president to a four-year term. The three presidents serve simultaneously and the chairmanship rotates among them every eight months.

The national level **parliament** consists of two chambers. The **BiH House of Peoples** is a 15-member body, whose members are chosen by the two entity parliaments. The RS National Assembly names five ethnic Serbian members and the Federation Parliament selects five ethnic Bosniaks and five ethnic Croats. The **BiH House of Representatives** has 42 directly-elected members: Voters in the Federation of BiH elect 28 parliamentarians and voters in the RS elect 14 to serve four-year terms.

Federation of BiH Government

The **Federation of BiH Parliament** has two chambers. The **House of Representatives** has 98 directly elected members. The **House of Peoples** is made-up of members appointed by the 10 **cantons**, regional governments that are roughly akin to counties. The **Federation of BiH Presidency** consists of a president and two vice presidents, chosen by the **Federation of BiH Parliament**.

Republika Srpska Government

The RS has an 83-member, directly elected, unicameral parliament called the **RS National Assembly**. Executive power in the RS is held by the **presidency**, consisting of an elected president and two vice presidents. There are no *cantons* in the RS.

What's at Stake?

On October 3, approximately three million voters will have a chance to elect representatives to the BiH presidency, BiH House of Representatives, RS president and vice presidents, RS National Assembly, Federation of BiH House of Representatives and 10 *cantonal* assemblies. A breakdown of the voting within the two entities looks like this:

In the RS, approximately 950,000 voters will elect a Serb member to the BiH presidency, BiH House of Representatives, RS National Assembly and RS president. In the Federation of BiH, approximately 1,700,000 citizens will elect a Croat or Bosniak member to the BiH presidency, BiH House of Representatives, Federation of BiH House of Representatives and *cantonal* assemblies. Additionally, 70,000 voters from the District of Brcko can opt to vote as a RS or federation citizen as a result of an agreement made in the Dayton Accord, given the area's historical importance to both the Federation of BiH and the RS.

At the national level, a total of 42 members will be elected to the BiH House of Representatives: 28 from the Federation of BiH and 14 from the RS. At the entity level (the RS and Federation of BiH), voters in the RS will elect 83 members to the National Assembly, while voters from the Federation of BiH will elect 98 members to the Federation

of BiH House of Representatives. Federation of BiH-based voters will also elect delegates to their 10 *cantonal* assemblies.

The electoral system is based on the *Sainte Lague* system of proportional representation for political parties, coalitions, and independents. Voting is conducted on open party ballot lists which were introduced to BiH during the April 2000 municipal elections. Open lists offer voters the opportunity to indicate their preferred candidate within a party's list and are considered as one vote for that party, coalition, or independent candidate.

Voters from both entities will elect three members to the rotating BiH presidency, one from each of the constituent peoples. Both regional entities have their own list that only registered voters from within a particular entity can use. For example, RS voters are only permitted to choose from a list of Serbs, while voters from the Federation of BiH can only choose from a list of Bosniaks and Croats. Even then, Federation of BiH voters are only allowed to vote for one candidate from the Bosniak/Croat list, not one from each ethnic group. The triumvirate national presidency is decided by a simple majority where the candidate from each ethnic group with the highest number of votes wins.

The RS presidency election works similarly. Citizens will elect one Serb, one Bosniak and one Croat. Voters may select only one candidate and the top candidate from the each ethnic group is elected to the presidency according to a simple majority. Among those three, the candidate with the highest number of votes will become president and the remaining two will serve as vice-presidents.

The Polls

The October elections will take place during a time of considerable pessimism in Bosnia. Recent polls show that more than 80 percent of citizens believe the country is going in the wrong direction. The economy, unemployment and corruption consistently top the list of issues that Bosnians are most concerned about. Meanwhile, many major political parties in both the Federation of BiH and RS continue to focus their campaigns on issues less important to the electorate such as ethnic rights and constitutional reform.

Despite the disconnect between citizen concerns and party messages, a [recent poll released by the National Democratic Institute](#) shows strong support for nationalist parties. In the RS, the ruling party of RS Prime Minister Milorad Dodik, the Party of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), leads in the polls with 38 percent; the main opposition Serbian Democratic Party (SDS) and the Party of Democratic Progress (PDP) trail at 17 and 6 percent respectively. In the Federation of BiH, the situation is tenuous for the ruling Bosniak parties, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) and the Party for Bosnia and Herzegovina (SBBiH) with nine percent and six percent respectively. The main opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP) has a clear lead with 29 percent, while the main Croat party, the Croatian Democratic Union, polls at seven percent. The Party for a Better BiH (SBB), an emerging populist party led by controversial businessmen Fahrudin Radoncic has five percent. However, there are still opportunities for parties to make up ground, as 25 percent of the population remains undecided.

The politicians with the highest approval ratings in BiH are Zeljko Komsic, SDP member of the BiH presidency, and Milorad Dodik, RS Prime Minister. Dodik is vying for the RS presidency and is expected to defeat chief rival Ognjen Tadic of SDS. Komsic is seeking re-

election to his seat on the BiH presidency; other popular leaders challenging for the position include Haris Silajdzic (SBiH), Fahrudin Radoncic (SBB) and Bakir Izetbegovic (SDA).

The Campaign and its Major Themes

Despite citizens' growing concerns over the economic situation in the country, major parties have made little effort to address such issues in their campaigns. Instead, they believe the only effective political tool is the manipulation of nationalist sentiments and rallying support around ethnic fault lines. One can recognize the mutual understanding of this strategy between the country's two most contrasting leaders: Milorad Dodik and Haris Silajdzic. While their goals are opposed, Silajdzic calls for the creation of a strong, centralized state, and Dodik advocates for the peaceful separation of the RS from BiH, each uses the other's rhetoric to distract voters from issues such as the economy, standard of living and unemployment.

Many of the campaign efforts in BiH focus almost exclusively on national unity versus dissolution, but there are some exceptions. Fahrudin Radoncic's SBB touts the accomplishments of its leader as a successful businessman who can draw on his private sector experience to lead the country and provide solutions that help ordinary people. SDA packages itself as a modern center-right party that can complete the task of European integration while maintaining its traditional role as the protector of Bosniak national identity. These goals have been criticized as being contradictory and some believe it has led to a steady decrease in the party's support. SDP is attempting a more sophisticated approach by campaigning on economic, education, justice, health and social policy. Despite its efforts to push these issues during the campaign, SDP also engages in vocal debates on constitutional reforms that would strengthen the central government and limit the power of the entities. Additionally, SDP has attempted to build upon the popularity of Zejlko Komsic by making him the face of their campaign rather than party chairman Zlatko Lagumdžija.

The situation in the RS is different as opposition parties fight an uphill battle against the ruling SNSD. Both SDS and PDP served in previous governments with few accomplishments to show for their time in power. A primary challenge for SDS and PDP is regaining public confidence and presenting credible messages. As such, PDP and SDS have resorted to negative campaign attacks against SNSD leader Milorad Dodik, accusing the RS Prime Minister of being corrupt.

Possible Outcomes

Barring an unlikely upset, SNSD is the clear favorite to win elections in the RS. It is difficult to foresee SDS candidate for RS presidency Ognjen Tadic mounting any serious opposition to Dodik in the final weeks of the campaign. However, the opposition does have opportunities to capture seats in the RS National Assembly and add its voice to the decision making process. If smaller parties like the New Socialist Party and the Democratic Party do well in their strongholds, they may prevent SNSD from achieving an absolute majority in the RS National Assembly.

The outcome is less certain in the Federation of BiH. The large percentage of undecided voters could swing the tide against the SDP in favour of SDA, SBiH and SBB. Some polls have indicated SDP suffers from an unenthusiastic base that does not feel as strongly about

their party when compared to the support of rival parties. The big question for SDP will be whether or not they are able to mobilize their supporters on Election Day.

There is growing concern that there will be a political stalemate in the BiH House of Representatives after the elections. If pre-election polls remain unchanged, SNSD and SDP would likely form the national government. However, such a coalition is almost impossible to envision, given the level of hostility between the two parties. Dodik has publically stated that he has no intention of going into any kind of coalition with SDP accusing it of "constant verbal attacks against SNSD," and "efforts to bash and undermine SNSD's position among its Western partners and organizations, most notably the Socialist International."

SDP has done little to diffuse the situation by labelling Dodik as the main threat to the survival of the country. Given the circumstances, BiH may be in store for several months of negotiations and political bargaining before a government can be formed.

IRI in Europe

In Europe, the International Republican Institute (IRI) focuses on helping political parties become more issue-oriented and responsive to voters' concerns. IRI's training helps parties create more coherent platforms, better strategic communications, more effective grassroots organizations, and stable party foundations or institutes that can provide necessary training and analytical support. IRI is also active in expanding political participation among women, youth and minorities. By working with governments and civil society to concentrate more on policy, IRI seeks to make the region's democracies more responsive and sustainable.

IRI's current program in BiH is funded through the United States Agency for International Development and focuses on strengthening the election capacities of parties ahead of the October 2010 elections, including candidate and political activist skills training.



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