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Religious Leaders Take Back Seat

Leaders of the republic's three religions once exercised significant political influence, but are not expected to have much of a say in upcoming elections.

By Julie Poucher Harbin in Sarajevo (BCR No 371, 2-Oct-02)

When Bosnians go to the polls on October 5 they are unlikely to be as reliant on their spiritual leaders for political guidance as they have been in the past.

The Muslim and Catholic authorities called on imams and priests to refrain from influencing voters in the run-up to the ballot, amid growing evidence that the electorate is losing interest in the nationalist values traditionally promoted by religious leaders.

In all the previous post-war elections local media and NGOs have reported numerous cases of spiritual representatives openly calling on their congregations to vote this way or that, which invariably benefited nationalist parties, seen as the protectors of ethnicity and religion.

But the latest opinion poll from the US National Democratic Institute indicates that only 5 per cent of Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), 15 per cent of Serbs and 32 per cent of Croats put "national interests" in first or second place when determining how to vote. Across all three ethnic groups, more than 60 per cent of people named the economy, employment and improved living standards as top priorities.

The ever-worsening economic situation has eroded support in recent years for the three main nationalist parties - the Serb Democratic Party, SDS, the Croat Democratic Union, HDZ, and the Muslim Party of Democratic Action, SDA.

This may partly explain why in this election campaign religious leaders have been wary of openly supporting particular political parties. Indeed, where such incidents have occurred, they have caused considerable controversy.

The Sarajevo-based weekly Slobodna Bosna recently became embroiled in a protracted war of words with Reis Mustafa Cerić, head of the Islamic Community, over the religious leader's alleged political bias.

In August, Slobodna Bosna's chief editor Senad Avdić criticised Cerić over a speech he had given in Tuzla to a group of Bosniak students in which he openly defended several SDA sympathisers in prison for corruption and involvement in organised crime.

Cerić claimed the SDA figures were only in jail because they were Bosniaks and warned the students that if they didn't stand up for their rights, they could be chased out of the country.

The exchanges between Avdić and Cerić culminated on August 28 in a decision by the Islamic Community, the religion's principal administrative body, barring the leaders of religious services in mosques from making any

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kind of references to political parties or politicians.

In a press statement, the Islamic Community said it did not support any individual political party, but reserved the right to "form opinions on issues connected with the preservation of faith, freedom and dignity of Muslims".

The Catholic Church - which out of the country's three religions has the greatest influence over its adherents - has also taken steps to limit political interference. Sarajevo-based Cardinal Vinko Puljic told the Mostar-based daily, Dnevni List, "The church does not suggest they (believers) vote for some political party but for political programmes.

"Some representatives of the parties would like to order church representatives to stand behind some politicians and their promises, and sometimes they succeed with some priests. However, such cases are exceptions."

Mike Doyle, political analyst for the International Crisis Group, cited Bishop Ratko Peric from Mostar as someone "closely connected with the HDZ...someone who's way overstepping the bounds between religion and politics".

Monsignor Mato Zovkic, based in Sarajevo, who has known Peric since they were fellow seminary students, called the bishop a "Catholic Croat hardliner". "He treats others as a danger because he has no experience living with non-Croats. He sees it as his duty to protect his people," Zovkic told IWPR.

Nevertheless, Zovkic said he could understand why some local Catholic priests do tell their congregation whom to vote for, even though the Pope officially forbids it. "Do you let them give their votes to a non-Croat, non-Catholic who will betray them later on?" he said.

Where the heads of the Islamic and Catholic churches have publicly barred their priests and imams from instructing voters in this election, the Serb Orthodox Church has remained silent.

Nonetheless, steps have been taken to dissociate religion from politics in Republika Srpska, RS. Deputies no longer recite an Orthodox prayer before parliamentary sessions. In July 2000, the Bosnian constitutional court struck out a provision in the RS constitution directing the state to materially support the church and cooperate with it in all fields - although there's evidence that Banja Luka is reluctant to enforce the ruling.

Doyle points to Vasilije Kacevenda, Serb Orthodox bishop in the Zvornicko-Tuzlanski region in eastern RS, as "an egregious example" of a senior religious figure abusing his position by getting involved in politics. Kacevenda supported the Bosnian Serb war effort throughout the conflict. He appeared on Serb television with the community's wartime leader Radovan Karadzic to bless the troops. He remains at his post.

Jakob Finci, head of the Jewish community, estimates only 5 per cent of Bosnians are truly observant and that the influence of religious leaders is on the wane, as the economy worsens. "You cannot live on religion, you have to make a living another way," he said. "It is important to work and have a secure place to work".

Julie Poucher Harbin is a freelance journalist in Sarajevo.

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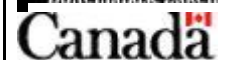
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