

Albanians In Kosovo Pushed to Edge



Kosovar activist Ramiz Zegiri was beaten up for the fourth time two months ago



PHOTOS BY MELISA GON/SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Signs protesting the Serbian government's university takeover lined the walls at the Albanian student headquarters in Pristina

Brutality reportedly on the increase in Serbian province

By Theresa Agovino
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Bujar Dugolli's right eye is still swollen from the brutal beating he endured back on October 1, when 500 students were attacked by Serbian police after a peaceful demonstration against a government takeover at the University of Pristina.

Because Dugolli is the student president of an underground parallel Albanian-language university, he got an especially severe battering. It lasted four hours and left him bedridden for 12 days.

Police brutality is routine in the apartheid-like Serbian province of Kosovo, where ethnic Albanians, who constitute 90 percent of the population, are firmly under the thumb of Serbian security forces.

The magnitude of the university violence was unusual, even for Kosovo. But what is even more unusual is that the protest proceeded against the

wishes of Kosovo's shadow president, Ibrahim Rugova, who believes that nonviolent, passive resistance is the only way to achieve independence from Serbia.

Kosovo's ethnic Albanians, known as Kosovars, voted for sovereignty in an unofficial 1990 referendum, a year after Serbia revoked the province's autonomous status, and they view Serbia as an occupying force.

Rugova is respected at home and abroad for keeping the Kosovars from launching their own war of independence. But after seven years of living in poverty and fear without any improvement in their situation, there are signs that his leadership is flagging.

The students defied Rugova on October 1 because his attempt to take back the university failed. "Rugova just hasn't done much," said Dugolli. "If he

NO WORK, NO MONEY

The economic situation in Kosovo is grim.

Since the Serbian government fired most Albanians and closed many enterprises in 1989, the jobless rate has hovered around a staggering 97 percent. Approximately one quarter of 2.2 million Kosovars survive on charity. Other families live on the what their children earn hawking cigarettes up to 15 hours a day. Armies of such children clog Kosovo's filthy streets. They carry the burden because they are less likely than their parents to be abused by the police.

"Now, the police just slap me once or twice on the face," said 15-year old Fitim Statovci. "Soon I'll be too old, and my brother will have to do this job."

The situation in Kosovo would be even more desperate without the dozens of European and



American charities and nongovernmental organizations operating there.

The groups distribute food, clothing, wood for heating, medicines and agricultural products such as seeds and fertilizers to the overwhelmingly needy population. The groups are also one of the only sources of steady, relatively high-paying jobs for Albanians.

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can't keep his promises, he should just go."

Rugova's moral authority is being undermined on several fronts.

The U.S. government set up an information office in Pristina last year that has been spreading the word that the West doesn't support an independent Kosovo. This has sown confusion and bitterness among Kosovars who believed that Rugova had wide international backing.

Also in 1996, a group calling itself the Kosovo Liberation Army began launching attacks against police stations, ignoring Rugova's demand for nonviolence.

The KLA has been especially active recently. Last week, three people, including a Serb policeman, were killed, and the group claimed to have shot down a Yugoslav Airlines training aircraft, killing two instructors and three student pilots.

Seventeen men are currently on trial for being members of the KLA. Scores of others have been convicted, although lawyers say confessions were beaten out of their clients.

Some insist that the KLA was created by the government of then-Serbian and now Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic to justify its harsh treatment of the Kosovars and to divert Serbian citizens' attention away from the country's dire economic state. Others maintain that the guerrillas are ethnic Albanians fighting for their people's freedom.

Either way, the KLA's very existence marks a dangerous escalation for Kosovo.

"Sooner or later, if people keep saying you are a terrorist, you start acting like one," said Seudije Ahmeti, a director for the Center for Protection of Women and Children, a clinic supported by foreign aid.

The world community has treated Rugova like a head of state because it fears the nightmare scenario in which a revolt in Kosovo would spread to neighboring Macedonia, which is also home to a large Albanian population, as well as to Albania itself.

Yet even Rugova's patrons are losing patience over his refusal to compromise his goal of independence when he knows there is no international support for it.

"The problem with Rugova is that he started to believe his own propaganda," said one international analyst who requested anonymity. "He is convinced that he is the great champion of democracy and that someday, international forces will force the solution he wants."

Rugova travels constantly and was unavailable for comment. Kosovars worry that his trips abroad insulate him from their very real street-level problems.

In the first 10 months of this year, 31 Albanians were killed, compared with 11 in all of 1996.

Many Kosovars think it is time for Rugova to move on. Elections for a new shadow president are supposed to be held this month, but Rugova has canceled such elections before.

Political rival Adem Demaci, who also favors a more activist though still nonviolent approach toward achieving independence, says he will run.

Demaci has been compared to Nelson Mandela because he spent 28 years in prison. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be a Serbian Frederik de Klerk for Demaci or anyone else to work with.

However, there are faint signs that Milosevic may be willing to compromise as a way to get the international sanctions against Yugoslavia lifted. The government has offered to return some of the buildings it seized from the University of Pristina in return for some control over the curriculum. Rugova's representatives turned down the offer.

Such intransigence has caused some ethnic Albanians to support former Kosovo Communist Party chief Mamut Bakali for president, even though he has not officially declared himself a candidate. He has been meeting U.S. and European officials and has a reputation for being willing to compromise.

But Rugova retains very strong support — especially in the countryside, where police brutality is most severe. The scores of international aid organization offices in Pristina have helped dampen human rights abuses there.

In the tiny town of Zahag, activist Ramiz Zegiri was beaten up for the fourth time two months ago. In hushed tones, his mouth hidden behind his bandaged hand, he describes how four men kicked him and beat him with sticks in his own home.

It was the first time Zegiri had been attacked in his home, a signal to him that the situation in Kosovo is deteriorating. Yet, he stands by Rugova.

"So far, our government thinks that peace is the best way," said Zegiri. "Rugova is our president, and we remain loyal to him."