

Kosovo, Still Messy After All These Years

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Editorial

Six years and four months after it made Kosovo a ward, the United Nations Security Council has ordered that talks begin on the future status of that blood-soaked Balkan province. This is to give the impression that the outcome is not decided. It is, and it's independence. The six nations that oversee Kosovo - the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Russia - have ruled out returning it to Serbia, linking it to Albania or partitioning it. So the task of Martti Ahtisaari, the former Finnish president who will lead the talks, is to carve yet another independent state out of the former Yugoslavia.

We have argued that Kosovo is neither prepared for nor deserving of independence. Its Albanian majority has shown no tolerance toward the Serbian minority and little capacity for self-government. Kosovo has no army, only a fledgling police force and powerful mafias. The only Albanian leader with any semblance of authority, Ibrahim Rugova, has lung cancer. His most likely successor, Ramush Haradinaj, was indicted by the international tribunal in The Hague and surrendered.

The Serbs will not voluntarily cede this territory, and Albanian rioting in March 2004, which destroyed 30 of the many ancient Serb churches in Kosovo, does not give the Serbs great confidence in an independent Kosovo. The Albanians have no faith that the Serbs would not revert to ethnic cleansing if they had the chance. These two groups are never going to agree.

So why is the United Nations moving ahead? The current arrangement requires Kosovo to demonstrate responsible self-rule before talks even begin on its ultimate status. That has proved an artificial and unworkable goal. The U.N. viceroy in Kosovo, Soren Jessen-Petersen, says it has created uncertainty on all sides and kept foreign investors out.

So the time has come to recognize the inevitable outcome, independence for Kosovo. But the Security Council can still insist on the attainment of democratic standards before granting it. That could force the Serbs to come to grips with having lost Kosovo in 1999. The Albanian Kosovars are more likely to demonstrate leadership if they are told that they are working toward independence, not merely toward talking about working toward independence.

The Security Council would be foolish to use the Ahtisaari mission to extract itself from a bad situation as soon as possible. Even with the best of intentions, an independent Kosovo will require international forces and strong oversight for a long time. In the Balkans, the default mode is violence.

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