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Serbia

Ten days that shook Serbia

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A fundamental obstacle fell on October 5 for those who want to establish a genuine "left". The whole day had been marked more by jubilation than by confrontations; the police presence 'guarding' the Parliament or state television buildings was derisory - by comparison with what is seen in Paris for "normal" demonstrations, or again what was deployed in Prague to protect the IMF and the World Bank against demonstrators some days earlier! The same had been true throughout the ten days from the day after the elections, September 25, until October 5, with a half-million people in the streets of Belgrade: daily and festive demonstrations, marked by corrosive slogans, helping to overcome fear, taking place in a capital without visible police.

These ten days which have shaken Serbia have then astonished the world - and the Serbs themselves: nobody imagined that the strongman in Belgrade would accept defeat without civil war. Yet while some stressed the traits of dictatorship characteristic of the Milosevic regime - the para-military forces used for ethnic cleansing, the harassment of the media, the disciplining of the universities and the judicial system, the unpunished crimes, the alliance with the far right - others pointed to the anti-imperialism, the effective pluralism the government tolerated, the existence of an independent press and an opposition which had won control of most of the big cities, including Belgrade, since the winter of 1996-97. This latter factor allowed the opposition a very systematic control in more than 90% of electoral districts, making fraud virtually impossible.

There were no conditions for a "pure vote class" in these elections. There was rather a kind of counter-plebiscite, with all classes mixed together, analogous to that which had brought Milosevic to power in 1987. The Serbian Democratic Opposition (DOS) presented itself as a "technical coalition" - very heterogeneous, stretching from liberal nationalism to social democracy via ultra-neoliberalism - to beat Milosevic. But only the personality of Vojislav Kostunica allowed the mobilisation of the great mass of those who, up until the summer, would have voted neither for Milosevic nor for the opposition as it was then, without Kostunica (the latter and his party were marginal and outside of the oppositional intrigues). That was why Milosevic took the risk of contesting the elections.

Neither Milosevic nor NATO and against corruption - whether it originated from the regime or the United States - with the hope of emerging from isolation in Europe: such was the profile of the victorious candidate. The regime's campaign, assimilating all opponents to NATO agents, thus could not discredit Kostunica. The oldest and poorest people of the rural zones still voted (at nearly 40%) for Milosevic, but the great mass of youth and workers voted against. On October 4, the miners of Kolubara were supported by the opposition while the regime sent its crack troops against the strike committee. The fraternisation that took place that day with the police force expressed what was happening at a deep level throughout the repressive bodies: a collapse, which explains the weakness of the police apparatus the next day.

But the miners who initially mobilised so as to have their vote recognised then turned against the corrupt and arrogant directors who formed the clientele of the regime. The DOS is, then, already before a major contradiction: calling for the right to self-management when its economic programme boils down to accelerated privatisation. The social and national questions of the Federation remain unresolved. As for the crimes that have been committed, they should be judged, in the first place by the Serbs themselves.