

***An interview with Ivo Markovic,
By Stojan Obradovic***

Bosnia and Herzegovina: BLACKMAILING THE PEOPLE

The national parties of the Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks retained complete political domination in early November at the general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although their relative victory is not as overwhelming as before, they will remain an important element in the new government. Many expected that the positive political changes in Croatia at the beginning of 2000 and the recent fall of Milosevic's regime in Serbia would influence the situation in Bosnia, and that perhaps the national parties that have ruled Bosnia for the past decade would finally be dethroned. But considering the trend of positive changes in the region, the election results were disappointing. What lies behind it? Why are these nationalistic politics, which have caused Bosnia so much grief for the past ten years and which experts say hold no future for Bosnia and Herzegovina, so vital? We talked about it with Fra Ivo Markovic, a Bosnian Croat theologian and Franciscan priest from Sarajevo, who is deeply involved in many activities and projects related to refugee return, tolerance and the general restoration of society. He is the founder of the organization for Face to Face Interreligious Service which aims to build a pluralistic society in Bosnia. He publicly criticizes nationalist politics and their proponents, nationalist parties, claiming they hold on to power only by systematically sowing permanent fear in their own people. At the last elections, Fra Ivo Markovic says, this was especially true for the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), the nationalist party of the Croatian people living in Bosnia. He regretfully adds that Catholic Church also supported such politics among Bosnian Croats.

Markovic: Both the leaders of the Catholic Church in Bosnia and the priests in the field supported HDZ. I think the reasons the Catholic Church supports the Bosnian HDZ are sad: it is a complex mixture of national sentiment and loyalty, but the other reason is simple: money. Religious workers easily turn into nationalist workers. They are lured by their blood and soil, that is, by instinct. The passion of being part of a group is a dominant part of national sentiment, and inertia can easily drag us there. This is why religious people are offended by such a betrayal of the Church's mission. The best proof of this betrayal is the Church's willingness to be used by the HDZ, sometimes even stooping to the point of bribery. HDZ representatives toured Croatian parishes and directly asked whether priests were willing to support the HDZ in exchange for money. Offers ranged from tens to hundreds of thousands of DEM. Some refused, some accepted. Now there are claims that the money was meant to go to refugees. Degraded refugees returning home after a decade of HDZ lies are now finding they are pawns in a game in which their fate is at stake. Many Bosnian priests are extremely poor and live together with the people in really difficult conditions, so they need the help. But it's sad when that aid is offered just before the elections and tied to political goals, and they are accepting it or falling for it. By supporting nationalists, the church is shutting its doors to the people who have other convictions and who are in dire need of her.

Q: *Is anyone in the Bosnian Catholic Church discussing the future of the Croatian people and the role and responsibility of the HDZ for the situation Bosnian Croats are in? Are there circles within the Church that criticize official support of the HDZ and how much influence it exercises?*

A. The Bosnian Catholic Church articulated its own interests and those of Croatian Catholics in Bosnia for some time in an entirely responsible way. It clearly stood up against the HDZ's idea of dividing Bosnia and its inclusion in Croatia, since this couldn't be done without war and ethnic cleansing, and is contrary to the Christian belief in the possibility of tolerance and the survival of the Church and its heritage in any place in the world. However, the majority of the Catholic Church in the areas of Bosnia that have a Croatian majority (western Herzegovina) later accepted HDZ's concept and still support it, secretly hoping for the creation of the third Croatian entity in Bosnia and this entity's eventual inclusion into Croatia. Despite the cataclysm Croatian Catholics in Bosnia experienced owing primarily to HDZ's policy, some priests decided to support that dangerous policy, I think out of inertia, a wartime identification with their own group, political manipulations, and so on. At the moment we have the following situation: most priests are more or less inclined to agree with HDZ's ideas. Some are indecisive, and a small group remain faithful to the Church's

original attitude of accepting the state of B-H, believing in equality and tolerance in a pluralistic Bosnia and Herzegovina. But I think this last group is the most determined; they have the clearest opinions, and the support of responsible persons on all sides in Bosnia.

Q: *Although many were displeased with election results in Bosnia and victory of nationalist parties, one should still take notice that in general their victory wasn't so overwhelming as before. Yet, it seems that Croatian nationalists came out with best results. Why is that?*

A: I was saying before the elections that support for nationalist parties like HDZ, SDS and SDA would be a kind of meter showing how far the insanity, fear and loss of individuality among the Bosnian people has progressed. On the one hand, it is an indicator of how much Bosnian Croats suffered and were manipulated by "human migration," and on the other, how much the HDZ, with the help of the Church, instilled into Croats a totalitarian reflex, a fear of consciousness and a faith in passion. This is especially humiliating since it results from church activities. Faith should result in consciousness and reason, an escape from myths and a recognition of power of the Spirit and faith that we can responsibly control our lives. Many responsible Croats have been working for years to help the Croatian people choose and decide like adults, with freedom and consciousness. However, just before the last elections the HDZ began to use primitive and aggressive techniques to manufacture fear. Thanks to the international representatives' laxity and the Church's approving attitude, the HDZ managed to frighten and delude Croats into giving the party their votes again.

Q. *You are one of the people who sounded the alarm that national extremists from Croatia are now being exported into Bosnia. How great is their influence?*

A. Nationalists cannot solve the pressing issues of the country; they are preoccupied with group identity, not with problems of the whole social dynamic. Issues of national identity end in narcissism and selfishness. Every nationalism necessarily robs its own people. Instead of bringing democratization and prosperity, HDZ gets mixed up in robbery and the mafia. After losing their positions in Croatia, HDZ mobsters are looking for support in western Herzegovina [an area of Bosnia with a Croatian majority]. Their only aim is to prevent legal mechanisms from gaining a firmer ground in Bosnia since they thrive on their absence. The same is happening in the Serb Republic. Even worse, those Serbian and Croatian mobsters are collaborating.

Q: *Another theory is that Bosnia and Herzegovina could become a haven for defeated extremists from Croatia and Serbia, which could produce new nationalist "explosions" in B-H. How much is that danger real?*

A: Nationalists rule by creating irrationality and fanaticism using fear and biological defense reflexes. If that fire spreads, it will be difficult to restrain it. So to let them have their way is very risky, since they could start igniting fear through terrorism in order to survive. The international representatives are the ones who should control it. However, they did such a lousy job with the elections that you'd be justified in asking them to resign. They let HDZ and SDS act in such an aggressive and violent manner that it was humiliating to the people, and in direct violation of human rights.

Q. *Now that the nationalist government has retained its power at the polls, there is some talk again that Bosnia and Herzegovina has no future, that division is the only realistic option.*

A. That's true--these ideas spread like wildfire given the chance. They have open proponents, and even more covert supporters who still can't fully hide them when they talk. It's clear that many Croats and Serbs would like to live in the same country as their people, but it's also clear that Bosnia cannot be divided; it has too many traditions and national groups living in every area of the country. But there are many Croats and Serbs who find their identity in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The idea of dividing Bosnia is irresponsible. It would certainly mean another war. Herzegovina and the Serb Republic must come to their senses. There is no third entity, and the Serb Republic must

be integrated into Bosnia. Such a division is not acceptable at the time when Europe, not to mention the world as a whole, is uniting.

Q. *How much do people in Bosnia and Herzegovina really feel the political changes and the new Croatian government?*

A. I think the influence from Croatia hasn't been as strong as we expected. We thought that the influence of the new Croatian policy would be felt more strongly. It was partly true, especially in bilateral relations, but HDZ's push to save itself pulled more weight. HDZ preserved its influence, and now we can only expect that party to obstruct democracy and the legal state by scaring the people. HDZ is now using the "return of Communism" in Croatia as a straw man for Bosnian Croats. Whether the new Croatian policy will win the confidence of Bosnian Croats depends on the radical opposition and on exposing the HDZ's criminal nature, as well as on long-term politics and patience.

Q. *While the political elite in Bosnia and Herzegovina remains separated ethnically, how do common people live, to what extent are they ready to embrace tolerance?*

A: The situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is better at a more basic level than in the politics created by nationalists. Living, travel, shopping, refugee return, illness, solidarity, help, and so on are constantly connecting people. I have information from various communities where refugees visit their own houses, where they are guests of the new tenants, of people who share the same or similar burden of suffering. However, because of a nationalistic climate, people deny it in their own national communities so as not to be called traitors. I know, for example, that Serbs visit returning Croats and Bosniaks and vice versa, but they hide it from their fellow countrymen. Nationalists are hiding information about returnees of other nationalities, so that makes it harder for humanitarian organizations to help them. In Bosnia and Herzegovina corruption starts at the top. There is no future or any normal life with HDZ, SDS and SDA. They are formally enemies, but they collaborate in robbery and in their clinging to power. Recently Izetbegovic explicitly said that he was prepared to cooperate with HDZ and SDS. It may seem shocking, but they have been cooperating since the war. They cannot solve any problems--on the contrary, they have been deepening divisions in the country, but they cooperate to sustain themselves and rule their people. They have been politically blackmailing their people. We can develop a normal country with laws, tolerance, and economic progress only after we remove the influence of nationalist parties in politics and society.

Q: *What are religious organizations doing to improve the situation in Bosnia, to bring normalization and tolerance?*

A: Unfortunately, religious organizations are more interested in themselves and their own protection. The inter-religious council in Bosnia, which is made up of the most prominent leaders of religious communities, should be very important in creating trust, and should be the most positive initiator in dialogue and peace. However, it seems they mostly work on nipping inter-religion initiatives in the bud, and preventing that practice from gaining a foothold. The power of religion lies in a community of believers, where people live, socialize and pray. In that sense, the most important people are Catholic, orthodox and Moslem priests. And there are not enough peaceful, dialogue-provoking, ecumenical initiatives. The civil sector is much more active in seeking peace, while initiatives from religious communities are negligible. Also, there are not many organization involved with inter-religious cooperation.

Q: *You have criticised the role and behavior of the international community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, claiming it was ineffective in eliminating "nationalist mafias". What can it do in that area?*

A: International representatives decide the rules of the game in Bosnia, based on human rights. They have been letting nationalist media into Bosnia, have been letting Croatia and Serbia brainwash people for years. They also acted irresponsibly in helping the nationalists before last elections. Posters and talks at nationalist rallies were literally a Nazification of Bosnian Croats and

Serbs. Jelavic addressed Croats like a man spurring dogs against other dogs. It is disappointing that this didn't bother those defending the dignity of human beings and society out of a responsibility to God.