

The Ministry of Truth and the Bosnian Elections

By Dave Chandler, LM-commentary mailing list, 17 September 1997

As you would expect, the municipal elections in Bosnia have been accompanied by distorted and prejudicial media coverage, where unrepresentative minority opinions are given disproportionate amounts of air-space through bullying and intimidation.

The international community's tight regulation of the Bosnian media has included the military take-over of broadcast stations and TV transmitters and the dispatch of three US air force planes equipped for psychological warfare ready to jam radio and TV broadcasts and override channels with other material. Any criticism of the actions of the international community or questioning of the imposed Dayton framework is enough to have free speech curbed and penalties imposed. Enforced election programming includes broadcasts by Carlos Westendorp, the international community's High Representative and the highest civilian authority in the neo-colonial state.

Here are a couple of snippets from an enforced broadcast by Westendorp on Republika Srpska channels, a few days before polling, explaining why international censorship is necessary for democracy:

‘We are your friends, and not your enemies. We are not an occupying force. To compare SFOR [the NATO force in Bosnia] with an occupying army is irresponsible. ... It is not just, we are here to help you, as I said; to present us as your enemies, rather than friends, is not just and we cannot accept that. ... I have the responsibility of restricting or suspending those programmes which are contrary to the truth, impartiality and peace.’

Speaking in favour of democracy, Westendorp explained that the lack of aid going to Republika Srpska was not the fault of the international community but Bosnian elected representatives, and that the votes of the people will not have great significance until their leaders agree to comply with international community dictates. In a great example of George Orwell's doublespeak he claims that ‘neither I nor the international community will stand on the side of any person or specific political opinion’, and yet:

‘I think most sincerely that we can look with hope towards the future in this country only when you decide to replace these [current] leaders with others.’

The intervention of the international community was not merely limited to the tight regulation of the media. Similar censorship guidelines governed the statements of election candidates and their supporters, being critical of international regulation was enough to get leading candidates thrown off party lists. In Republika Srpska international intervention has been particularly intense in the run up to the polls.

Under US pressure, SFOR has intervened in internal political disputes in order to divide the leading Serb party and undermine politicians hostile to Dayton. A populist election rally in Banja Luka was broken up and many people prevented from attending by SFOR troops while heavy-handed military interventions elsewhere have provoked clashes with angry locals in several areas. The Republika Srpska parliament has been dissolved and the Constitutional Court ruling on the illegality of this has been ignored by the international community which is urging new Parliamentary elections to try to break the populist Serb leadership based in Pale.

It is likely that elections in Bosnia are to become more and more of a farce. The current municipal elections demonstrate that the elections merely serve to give the international community more control over the political process. The wishes of the Bosnian people may be reflected in the election results but, under international regulations, how many votes candidates receive is becoming increasingly irrelevant. The OSCE, (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe) tasked with organising the elections, also has to ratify the results. The ratification process is a new experiment in degrading Bosnian democracy. The OSCE will not ratify the results until December 31, not because they need to check the poll count or deal with irregularities, but because ratification now depends on how the elected officials behave. A failure to share out positions with minority parties or to implement international community wishes will lead to financial penalties and the international instatement of candidates with less votes.

While criticism of this blatant international manipulation of the elections is prevented in Bosnia by the strong-arm tactics of NATO enforcers, the British media seem equally reluctant to raise any defence of democracy in the region. Austrian, Italian, German and French media have raised concerns with the US government's sponsorship of direct political intervention in the election process. The British media, in contrast, has accused the international supervisors of the election process of being too soft. Jonathon Steele, spokesperson for The Ministry of Truth at the Guardian, complained that the OSCE head, US Ambassador Robert Frowick, was caving in on basic principles of democracy (Guardian, 13 September). Steele's complaint was that Frowick could be in danger of making too many concessions to the nationalist majorities, in other words the Bosnian electorate, by not stating clearly on exactly which grounds he will refuse to certify elected councils.

In the uncritical world of British media doublespeak, democracy means dictatorship and dictatorship stands for freedom. A new breed of democrats are today arguing in support of foreign armies which prevent election rallies, send snatch-squads to deal with opponents, control the media and carry out psychological warfare against the electorate. These democrats see nothing untoward about foreign administrators who encourage the dissolving of Parliament, ignore the results of ballots and can veto candidates both before and after the ballot.