
VIOLENCE ERUPTS AS PROTESTERS STORM MACEDONIA PARLIAMENT

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Zoran Zaev, who leads the main opposition party, the Social Democrats, was seen with blood on his face amid the chaos, while Interior Minister Agim Nuhieu told media that 10 deputies had been injured, as well as some police and journalists.

The violence erupted after around 100 nationalist protesters supporting the rival VMRO-DPMNE party entered parliament waving Macedonian flags and singing the national anthem.

An AFP photographer said he saw around a dozen masked men among the demonstrators, while footage showed chairs and tripods being thrown as fistfights broke out in the parliamentary press room.

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They oppose a proposed coalition between Zaevs Social Democrats (SDSM) and ethnic Albanians, which they perceive as a threat to national unity.

According to local media, Thursdays incident broke out after the SDSM and Albanian parties voted in a new parliamentary speaker although the former speaker had closed the days session.

Their chosen speaker, Talat Xhaferi, is an ethnic Albanian.

The EU later said it took positive note of Xhaferis election.

Call for calm

A few hours after the protesters entered parliament, police took control of the building, but an estimated 2,000 to 3,000 protesters remained outside.

I am calling for tensions to be calmed and for non-violence, said President Gjorge Ivanov in a televised speech, inviting political party leaders to his office on Friday to discuss the situation.

No one from abroad will solve our problems, he said.

For a decade until last year, Macedonia was ruled by the conservative VMRO-DPMNE and its leader Nikola Gruevski.

Decembers election saw the party secure 51 seats in the 120-seat parliament – or two more than the SDSM, but the conservatives failed to reach a deal with kingmaking Albanian parties.

Although Zaev then reached an agreement with the Albanian groups, Ivanov refused to give him a mandate to form a government.

An ally of Gruevski, the president expressed concern over the controversial demand of Albanian parties that Albanian be made an official language across Macedonia.

Critics of the demand fear it could lead to the break-up of the small country of around two million people, about a quarter of whom are ethnic Albanians.

Following a seven-month ethnic Albanian insurgency in 2001 that left more than 100 people dead, a peace accord was reached providing more rights for the minority.

Alarming

The EU and the United States have urged Ivanov to reverse his decision and grant Zaev a mandate.

Macedonias opposition has also warned its conservative rivals that they are playing with fire by using the ethnic card in a bid to stay in power.

Decembers vote was supposed to end two years of political upheaval, sparked by a huge wiretapping scandal, but it has only served to deepen the crisis in Macedonia, which aspires to join both NATO and the EU.

Both the SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE blamed each other for provoking tensions after Thursdays violence.

A spokesman for the human rights organisation Council of Europe said the incident was alarming, while Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama expressed concern over the really dramatic situation.

Macedonia criticised Albania earlier this month for open interference with its internal politics.

Russia has accused Albania, NATO and the European Union of trying to impose a pro-Albanian government on Macedonia.

The Russian foreign ministry accused the West of helping Albanian nationalists in their efforts to

create a Greater Albania.

We assert that, under the guise of unfounded accusations of attempts to destabilise southeastern Europe aimed at Russia, efforts are being made to implement the Greater Albania project, now based on the Albanian constitution, which gives Tirana the right to defend the interests of Albanians abroad. Under the guise of hypocritical talk about the need to stabilise the region under the NATO umbrella, the very foundations of stability are being shaken; a new policy course has been adopted to redraw the borders in the Balkans, which will inevitably increase the conflict potential, the ministry stated.

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