

Book Review

David Chandler (1999): *Bosnia. Faking Democracy after Dayton* (London-Sterling, VA: Pluto Press). £45.00. ISBN 0745314082

There has been a marked difference between the attention Bosnia received from journalists and academia during the four-year war and afterwards. The unique experiment of a concerted effort by the international community to ensure the existence of a state otherwise in jeopardy has not only had an impact on Bosnia itself, but on Kosovo and potentially on future areas of western intervention. In this light, David Chandler attempts to fill an important gap. By documenting the efforts of the international community to “democratise” Bosnia since 1996, the author seeks to provide evidence that, not only has the opposite been achieved, but, furthermore, that the new interventionist line taken in Bosnia, in particular since Carlos Westendorp assumed the position of the High Representative in 1997, has actually replaced democratisation with external institutional engineering.

First, Chandler discusses the impact of the theoretical debate on democratisation in Bosnia. He points to the general position that democratisation requires more than merely free and fair elections. On the basis of this assumption, the international community has become engaged in numerous fields, such as support for the media and NGOs, in order to create sustainable democratic development. The author then turns to the limits of the sovereignty over Bosnia achieved through international control.

In the chapter on “Power-Sharing”, he very aptly describes the process in which the international administration tried to enforce inter-ethnic co-operation after the elections in 1996 and subsequently confirmed the dominant role of the three national parties. In a chapter on “Human Rights”, Chandler maintains that the predominant role granted to human rights is essentially exaggerated. He views the human rights abuses since the end of the war as relatively minor and, furthermore, puts forward the highly problematic thesis that most refugees do not want to return to their original homes (pp. 106-108). Chandler points to the economic situation in their place of origin as a predominant reason for not returning. When discussing media developments, the author once more attempts to argue against conventional wisdom by claiming that the absence of non-national media is caused by a lack of interest among the population. Similarly, the author describes the work of most inter-ethnic NGOs as being out of touch with ordinary people.¹

The author, who teaches East European Development at the University of Northumbria, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK, suggests a less interventionist approach by the international community in Bosnia and sees disengagement as a source of potential democratisation.

Many of the author’s arguments sound intriguing as they seem to explain the apparent lack of democratisation of Bosnia, despite the extensive and expensive inter-

1 For an alternative view of how the nationalist parties have obstructed human rights, the independence of the media and elections, see David Campbell (1998): *Violence, Identity, National Deconstruction and Justice in Bosnia* (Minneapolis & London: Minnesota University Press), pp. 221-225, 232-233.

vention of the international community. However, his arguments are deeply flawed. The weakness of the book lies in its omissions. Discussing democratisation and its discourse in regard to the wave of democratisation in eastern Europe in the past decade, he makes no mention of the specific characteristics of democracy in multi-ethnic societies. The biggest challenge of Bosnia is how to give democratic institutions a form to accommodate all three nations, a challenge mentioned only negatively by the author when describing the international attempts to build (or enforce) coalitions between the national parties. Neither Donald Horowitz, Arend Ljiphart or Ted Gurr, just to mention a few political scientists who have written extensively on democracies in plural societies, are mentioned. Thus, the attempts of the international communities to forge inter-ethnic co-operation seem undemocratic or even simply ridiculous, while they are mostly belated and incoherent. Chandler rightly describes the *ad hoc* nature of these attempts. Instead of enforcing inter-ethnic co-operation after the elections, the international community should have ensured prior to the elections, by electoral laws and institutional arrangements, etc., that inter-ethnic co-operation was necessary.

Chandler also ignores the history of the conflict and treats the three national parties with frightening equality. He devotes a lot of space to the attempts of the international administration to split the SDS and to weaken the hardliners (who he places frequently in quotation marks, as if they were not) and describes the loss of sovereignty as a consequence of the Republika Srpska. At the same time, he ignores the obstruction of the Dayton agreement by the SDS all too lightly and pays virtually no attention to the continuing prevention by the SDS of refugee return to eastern Bosnia. In addition, he grants no great importance to the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, as it supposedly has only little impact on the population of Bosnia. The fact that it serves the purpose of punishing war criminals, which should be a good enough reason in itself for the existence of the court, evades his attention. The absence of historical contextualisation leaves the reader under the impression that the SDS is the victim of unjustified western intervention, when the behaviour of the SDS (as well as the HDZ and, partly, the SDA)² during the Bosnian wars begs the question as to whether democratisation can be achieved with these parties. A party which engaged in ethnic cleansing, murder and pillage against other nations, and monopolised the political and economic space within the nation, can hardly be a player in a democratic Bosnia, with or without western engagement.

Similarly, the absence of political killings and abductions itself is not to be interpreted as a sign of a good human rights record. The war has largely homogenised the territories of Bosnia, leaving little room for inter-ethnic conflicts. However, the return of refugees is the test of human rights and here the record for most parts of Bosnia remains dismal. Chandler names economic reasons for the trickle of refugees to their former homes, thereby neglecting that ethnicity and the economy are not separate spheres.³ Jobs are hard to find as a minority, and most houses and apartments have

2 Editor's Note: SDS (Serbian Democratic Party); HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union); SDA (the (Muslim) Democratic Action Party).

3 See, for example, Drazen Simić (1999): *Privatisation According to National Quotas. A Pile of Money for the Exchange of Power*, AIM, 8.7.1999.

been occupied in the meantime by refugees of the other nation, making a return impossible. The freedom of the media functions in large parts of Bosnia similar to how it operates in Croatia and Serbia: free and non-national media exist, but they are constantly attacked as being “traitors” by the nationalist media of the three parties and taken to court on dubious charges. Buying an opposition newspaper is still an invitation for trouble in some parts of Bosnia. Chandler remains thus on the surface and is fooled by the supposed freedom.

The author is correct to note that not all national parties and organisations are destructive and deserve to be marginalised. In fact, a multi-national country like Bosnia must enable political and cultural expression to all national groups in order to assure its own survival. The problem is only what programme these groups advocate. The three big national parties (and several others), at least, have not had a good record in Bosnia and will probably remain an obstacle to democratisation in Bosnia.

Finally, David Chandler pays barely any attention to the linkages between Bosnia and its two neighbours. The intervention of the authoritarian regimes in Croatia and Serbia have both contributed to the slow progress in the democratisation of Bosnia. The efforts of the international organisations in Bosnia can only succeed if the neighbours succeed themselves in democratising, otherwise institution building in Bosnia will remain hollow and reliant on the international presence. The failure of the international administration in intervening more forcefully at the beginning of its presence in Bosnia actually might have been the prime causes for the slow progress. Had war criminals been arrested more swiftly and elections held only after a two year period, the extreme nationalists might have gathered less support than they did in 1996. There is no reason to believe that less intervention would have produced more democracy and justice for all national groups, especially those in a minority, in Bosnia.

Occasionally, Chandler’s usage of sources is problematic; he refers, for example, to Diane Johnstone on the issue of the rape of women during the war (pp. 96-97). Johnstone, who is not an expert on the issue, has been most noticeable in recent years for writing articles which reflect undigested Serbian government propaganda and which contain half-facts and gross distortions. On the other hand, Chandler makes no use of local sources of information, even if they are available in English, such as the excellent reports of AIM (Alternative Information Network), or the reports of the different news agencies and newspapers in Bosnia.

Chandler’s book provides ample material on the role of the international community in Bosnia. At times, the text is overwhelmed with long quotes from reports and other materials from international organisations active in Bosnia. His line of argument is provocative and poses the right questions, while often giving the wrong answers. Thus, there is still a need for a book which would provide a more balanced account of the political developments in Bosnia since 1996 and the inter-relationship between the international administration and the local political sphere.

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