

BOOK REVIEW

Adis MERDZANOVIC, *Democracy by Decree: Prospects and Limits of Imposed Consociational Democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina*
(Stuttgart, ibidem-Verlag, 2015)

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Democracy by Decree: Prospects and Limits of Imposed Consociational Democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Before even opening the book, *Democracy by Decree: Prospects and Limits of Imposed Consociational Democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina* captures the reader's attention with its intriguing and provocative title. But what author Adis Merdzanovic delivers in its pages is equally engaging. Merdzanovic illustrates how the consociational power-sharing arrangements in Bosnia and Herzegovina were imposed by the international community following the wars in the 1990s, rather than genuinely initiated from inside a country, and have, perhaps unsurprisingly, largely failed.

The first part of *Democracy by Decree* provides a brief overview of the theories of nationalism. Ethnically or religiously rooted nationalism is accepted as the main reason for tragic developments in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Merdzanovic claims that nationalism in the Western Balkans amalgamated national identity with memories and became a mobilising force for the continuation of the national struggle. Furthermore, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the control and classification of the population through religion, which dates to Ottoman times, overlapped with unequal livelihoods and economic opportunities for different religious groups. As a result, the process of building national identities in Bosnia and Herzegovina was not the same for the three major ethnic groups and remains the cardinal obstacle for reconciliation and coexistence today.

The second part of Merdzanovic's book concisely introduces the emergence and development of consociation theory. The author underlines, for instance, the difference between the normative claim of universal applicability of consociational democracy and its real-world success. He then criticizes the use of the concept power sharing as a synonym for consociation, finding it "inaccurate, confusing, and reductionist" (p. 112). The practice showed that consociations that possess certain characteristics are more likely to succeed (non-existence of majority but equilibrium between groups, similar socio-economic level, territorial segregation, loyalty within group, moderate party pluralism, dominant elites, wish for system maintenance, tradition of compromise, comprehensive participation at the system and negotiating table and the consociational solution that comes from within, p. 118), but several decades, roughly five, are needed (p. 129).

The influence of external actors, a vital component of consociational democracy, is also the practice's biggest shortcoming. To explain this, Merdzanovic explains the book's central concept: imposed consociation. In a consociation established in a conflict-torn polity, external actors play a crucial role, especially if the external actor's influence continues. External actors can be collective international actors or states with a strategic interest in a particular region (p. 141). Merdzanovic argues that the second element of the definition – external actors' influence – is more important because some authority outside of the state can intervene by imposing legislative or executive decisions and can thus alter a consociational system to such an extent that it becomes a new political regime. This international regulation body, as the author conceptualizes it, and its "intervention prerogative", forms the basis of the imposed consociation model. The intervention prerogative does not have to be real or implement; its existence and potential applicability are enough to shape the state. The prerogative, in fact, is usually only used when local political elites cannot reach compromise, but it results in decreasing local politicians' willingness to cooperate and readiness to compromise.

The main shortcoming of Merdzanovic's concept is that it is based on the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is currently the only such example. Yet, such conceptualization is nevertheless important because the classification of Bosnian system under any of the existing concepts of power sharing is nearly impossible. It is not a federation or confederation, and not even an obvious consociation. The author does, however, analyse the nuances of the consociational elements in the governance structures on Bosnia and Herzegovina to give the reader better context.

Democracy by Decree reminds us that politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina has its own logic and is marked by nationalist rhetoric, harsh election campaigns, and coalitions aimed only at advancing politicians' personal benefits. Many problems regarding the established system were obvious from the very beginning, such as the premature elections, which legalised warring parties leaders, the existence of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) with no tool or force to implement its functions, and upon it being given by the Bonn Powers, the non-existence of the body supervising it. Merdzanovic then focuses on how the Bonn Powers made the OHR integral to the political system by providing a tool for external interference in the decision making process. In the ninth chapter, the author analyses the OHR and its leaders from 1996 to 2013. Merdzanovic not only explains the professional achievements of these people in using the Bonn Powers but also the difficulties, challenges, and shifting dynamics during the periods in which they operated that shaped the decision bringing process. This part of the book, based on interviews with each leader of OHR, is a valuable source for any student or researcher who might be interested in researching the OHR more broadly. For Merdzanovic, Bosnia and Herzegovina is "the experiment in democracy" in consociational democracy, which functions neither autonomously nor as a protectorate. The two distinct systems – one of a formally democratic state and the other a system of external decision-making – function separately and often at cross purposes.

Merdzanovic concludes his study by enumerating the obvious failures of the contradictory solution applied to the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These include the numerous applications of the veto right and others complicated procedures, which make its functioning nearly impossible. Some lessons can be learned from the Bosnian case: the same leaders who were in power during the war stayed in power after peace treaty, the constitution was included in the peace agreement, and the international community rushed to claim success and accomplishment in its peace-building

activities and failed to ensure the rule of law. For Merdzanovic, the only solution of the complex Bosnian problem lay in the hands of the international community, but their inconsequentiality was the major problem of their involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Merdzanovic's book is informative and provides a well-written analysis of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the current situation in Bosnian society. It includes unbiased outlooks for the most important politicians in the country both for the current situation and future prospects. The book conceptually contributes to the literature on consociational arrangements, and Bosnia and Herzegovina as a consociational system. It also provides an alternative in understanding Bosnia and Herzegovina and its structure. By offering rich data about the OHR and its role in the system, of which little literature exists, it sheds light on this important institution in contemporary peace building.

Democracy by Decree is a valuable source for academics working on consociational democracy and a useful tool for practitioners in peace building and conflict resolution. The lessons learned from the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina could help prevent future policy makers from repeating the same mistakes in new cases. The book's shortcoming might be its structure, since the organization of some sections and chapters is confusing. The dismal outlook for country's future development could be another shortcoming, but this author's choice is understandable, as at the moment it is difficult to give any alternative hypotheses about the country's future development. What we can hope for is that the international community learned from their own mistakes and shall not repeat them in other cases of conflict resolution. This book, and the important lessons of the Bosnian case, should help.