

YUGOSLAVIA: Political Trials Announced

Trials have been set in October for former Kosovo party chief Azem Vlasi and 14 other ousted ethnic Albanian leaders on charges of organizing ethnic Albanian protests last March; the trials, inspired by Serbian officials, will add to interregional tensions. The protesters were trying to thwart Serbia's bid for greater control over mostly Albanian Kosovo Province; resulting riots led to the deployment of Army troops and at least 25 deaths. The prosecution is finding it difficult to build a strong case against Vlasi. Northern liberals view his arrest as symbolizing Serbian authoritarianism. State President Drnovsek, a Slovene, recently cautioned the Kosovo prosecutors against violating legal norms.

The prosecution will distort and exaggerate the role Vlasi and the others probably played in organizing the demonstrations in these largely political trials. The outcome, probably prison sentences of several years, will serve to legitimize Serbian leader Milosevic's ouster of the provincial leadership last March. Kosovo Albanians, although still intimidated by security forces, may try to hold demonstrations in the province to protest the sentencing of the popular Vlasi. Belgrade will react sharply to any Western criticism of human rights abuses surrounding the trials.