

Serbian Socialists split over Milosevic 'attack'

**Agence France-Presse
September 21, 2005**

BELGRADE Sept 21 (AFP) - Three staunch allies of former Yugoslav president and genocide suspect Slobodan Milosevic walked out of his political party Wednesday in protest at a slight against the former strongman, a report said.

Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) official Milutin Mrkonjic told the Beta news agency that he and two other SPS parliamentarians would form a new group called the "independent group of deputies SPS-Slobodan Milosevic."

The agency reported that Mrkonjic was furious that the SPS leadership had ignored their demands to fire two party officials who had "attacked the personality of Slobodan Milosevic at the party's convention."

"The top party leadership creates the problem. Without Slobodan the SPS does not exist and they don't understand and don't want to understand that. That's the essence of the conflict," Mrkonjic said.

Milosevic has been in custody at the UN war crimes tribunal at The Hague since June 2001. He is standing trial on more than 60 counts of war crimes, including genocide, and crimes against humanity for his role in the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo that tore apart Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

However he formally remains chief of the SPS and even topped an SPS list of candidates at parliamentary elections in 2003.

The SPS has 12 out of 91 Serbian deputies in the parliament of Serbia and Montenegro, a loose union of two neighbouring Balkan republics which grew out of the rubble of the dispaned Yugoslav federation.

In Serbia, where Milosevic remains a symbol of strength to many hardline nationalists, the conservative minority government of Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica has been ruling with the support of 22 SPS deputies.

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