Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Polity on the Brink


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The book, titled *Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Polity on the Brink* and written by Francine Friedman who is Professor of Political Science at Ball State University, mainly focuses on Bosnia’s history with a very different perspective unlike many arguments in which ‘ancient ethnic hatred’ is deemed as the main motivation for tragedy happened during the dissolution of former Yugoslavia. Friedman examines how a country which was formerly the centre of Yugoslavia geopolitically and economically could become the puppet of greedy political and economic elites who are on the pursuit of just solidifying their own power. The international community has failed in easing tensions during the Bosnian war and the following troubles. This book consists of 5 chapters which are also composed of several subheadings.

In the first chapter, the author begins with the Bosnia’s historical foundations. According to the author, the historical background of Bosnia should be outlined with two criteria to assert the significance of its history for the contemporary Bosnia. As first criteria, Friedman reminds that there is no indication about the conflict based on nationalities of ethnic groups among Serbs, Croats or Muslims living in Bosnia under the Ottoman Empire. Secondly, since the medieval era Bosnia had been waiting for its independence until the end of 20th century. Within the Ottoman Empire, religion was the most central defining feature instead of a specific national identity. The author infers that tensions among Bosnians were not the outcome of ethic hatreds despite existence of their ethic differences. At the stage of history, Bosnia has shown up as an autonomous part of the Ottoman Empire and Austro-Hungarian Empire until the beginning of 20th century, as witnessing Yugoslav Kingdom and being exposed to some sanctions of the Communist state manifestations and finally releasing as a nation-state. Despite passing into the hands of many different authorities, the country was ethically cohesive within its varied communities. For instance, the Bosnian population was dragged into the war to encounter at different sides, on the basis of their locality rather than any ethnic orientation during the First World War. However, when nationalism was flourished by republican elites for gaining support to surpass the communist partisans, even these elites could not predict how these propagandas would result in. The collapse of communism in the Eastern Europe had a critical role on the economic decline in Yugoslavia. With saying “…the conflict that dissolved Yugoslavia was mostly a result of the stresses caused by the transformation of a socialist society to a market economy and democracy”, Friedman means that social and eco-
nomic problems were increasingly seen as the fault of other nations within Yugoslavia and that finally led to the ethnic conflagration.

In the second chapter, the continuous process of Yugoslavia’s dissolution at the end of the 20th century is widely analyzed. Friedman cherishes a broader and detailed viewpoint, in particular factual background, due to the realization in how international principles could let a province within Europe drifted. That is so; the historical background of the Bosnian war can be referred to recite this chapter. The nationalist agendas were exploited by Serbian political elites to incite against other ethnics to arrogate Serbian sovereignty. These incidents resulted in kind of perception within other ethnics as Slovenian, Macedonian, and Bosnian as to seek for independence from federal and therefore finally communist Yugoslavia disintegrated by the independency proclamations of Slovenia and Macedonia. After these independences were proclaimed and immediately recognized by both EC and USA, Bosnian Muslims also asserted a claim of having right for independency. In the meantime, Bosnian Serbs realized the imminent independence of Bosnia and instantaneously declared the independence of Serb Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. That interference can be interpreted as the determination in holding at least Bosnian territory. On the other hand, while political and social tensions become violent, the international community declared the chaos in the Balkans as seemingly an internal problem within Yugoslavia for a while. Maybe, the attempts to gather all parties of conflict and conclude a treaty such as under a plan developed by Lord Peter Carrington, The Badinter Advisory Commission plan, Lisbon Conference or Vance-Owen Peace Plan can be conciliatory but lack of sanction. When The UN Security Council imposed embargo on whole Yugoslavia, they overlook a point that the power of Bosnian Muslims to resist against full-armed Yugoslavia was also destroyed. Thus, Bosnian Serbs were encouraged to realize the Greater Serbia dream and enforce Bosnian Muslims to get out of the land Serbs claimed. Thereby, unforgettable and aggravated murders happened in just a few days. Eventually, international powers urge parties to agree on a ceasefire. Actually, when analyzing the conjuncture it seems that central claims of the author, which indicated that the deferred intervention of international powers will not purge parties and they are still as guilty as the parties in war, are creditable.

Friedman emphasizes that according to Dayton Peace Accords (DPA) that puts an end to three and half year long Bosnian War, it was believed that Bosnia Herzegovina would become a democratic state which able to conduct its own affairs without need for less international intervention. All theoretical and institutional frameworks were done in accordance with the reconstruction and reformation of Bosnia in this agreement under the control of representatives of the US and the EU. However, in her book, Friedman states that while the international community was striving to democratize Bosnia, they basically failed to efficiently put into practice democratic restructuring as mentioned in the DPA. Western interference as a peacekeeping force caused an intensive reaction in Bosnia, which will also cause to put back the efforts of the peace-build-
ing process. Nearly a decade later, troops under the control of NATO are still in the country to enforce the peace. In addition to the failure of the US and the EU during post-war period, Friedman also accuses the elites of establishing a nationalist media network before the Balkan wars, which encouraged ethnic identity and further underpin ethnic tensions. On the other hand, as is the case in influences of European countries on Bosnia, Bosnian politics have also influenced Europe.

In conclusion, the book is seemingly beneficial in analyzing how the international community can be unsuccessful in nation-building especially within the Balkans. It is actually true that “When the Berlin Wall came down, it fell on Bosnia Herzegovina.” Now a province in the middle of Europe, the choices of its elites may well force Bosnia either to a secure future, integrated into an expanding European entity, or to a future filled with insecurity, conflict, and adversity. With its content covering the country’s history, economics, international relations and politics, this book, in general, is highly recommended to social scientists and researchers to shed light upon contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina. If we need to summarize the book with one of expressions of Friedman, it should be like that: “All the things that were said about the various ethnic and religious groups being at odds for centuries are nonsense... The communists wanted to hold onto their power base. They turned one group against another and everything, we now observe, happened.”