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A big step for N. Ireland

By Brendan O'Leary

The Irish Republican Army has begun to decommission its weapons, to the satisfaction of the International Commission on Decommissioning; the governments of Northern Ireland, the United States, and the United Kingdom; and Ulster Unionist Party leader David Trimble.

Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams urged the move on Monday, and the IRA announced it on Tuesday. The question is, Why now?

The answer: Because it is in the interests of Sinn Fein - and because Sinn Fein wants to save the peace process.

Adams and Martin McGuinness persuaded the Irish republican movement that preserving the IRA's arsenal serves no fundamental strategic purpose.

By the summer of 2001, the institutions and confidence-building measures of the Good Friday Agreement were or were about to be in place. The UK finally moved to implement commitments on policing - previously betrayed. These arrangements dramatically improve the political position of Northern Ireland's nationalists and cultural Catholics. In successive elections, Sinn Fein had been the prime political beneficiary of the agreement, radically expanding its vote share as a significant demographic change.

When the IRA appeared unwilling to decommission its weapons, the Ulster Unionist Party began to undermine the new institutions. Trimble illegally banned Sinn Fein ministers from participating in the new North-South Ministerial Council. He resigned as first minister, pushing the British government into suspending the agreement's institutions. And most recently he withdrew his ministers from the power-sharing executive. Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionist Party followed suit. All looked bleak.

But Sinn Fein's leaders have surveyed the territory. The IRA was badly embarrassed by unauthorized adventurism in Colombia by Irish republicans, and after the atrocities of Sept. 11, Sinn Fein was under increasing pressure from the U.S. government and Irish Americans to make clear that the IRA was no longer involved in political violence. That atmosphere has given Adams and McGuinness an opportunity to handle their hardliners. In effect, they can now say to them: Violence is no longer useful as a political instrument.

So the IRA is in the process of self-dissolution because it believes the agreement, with Sinn Fein as a prime player within its institutions, serves IRA goals better than violence does.

What will happen now?

Expect the following:

The British government will make fast moves on demilitarization.

The British government will make clear its commitment to reforming the court system and

stabilizing the institutions of the agreement.

Hard-line unionists will gripe at such measures - but nevertheless the Ulster Unionist Party will return its ministers to the executive - probably followed by Paisley's party.

Pressure will increase on loyalist paramilitaries currently in breach of their cease-fires. If they do not comply, they will be isolated, and any of their members recently freed from prison may be subject to rearrest.

Yet, there is a sting in the tail for Trimble and the Ulster Unionists. Within a week the assembly must reelect a new first and deputy first minister. The positions, identical in power, are required to have both the support of a majority in the Assembly *and* a majority of its registered nationalists and its registered unionists.

The difficulty for Trimble is that one member of his party, Peter Weir, is no longer the party whip. Weir even has condemned Adams' groundbreaking speech of Monday as a "cynical ploy." That leaves Trimble, and the likely nationalist nominee for deputy first minister, Mark Durkan, one vote short of the required majority among registered unionists.

If Weir's mind cannot be changed, and Trimble and Durkan fail to be elected, the British secretary must trigger fresh elections. A suspension by the British government would be extremely provocative to all nationalists, who regard the suspension power as a fundamental breach of the agreement. Therefore, such a suspension will not happen.

So in the next week Peter Weir may become the most famous person in Ireland.

In the event of such elections, Sinn Fein is likely to do very well - as it is poised to do in the rest of Ireland next year. The outcome of elections within the unionist camp is more difficult to call - though the start to IRA decommissioning should mightily assist Trimble's party in its struggle with Paisley's DUP.

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