

Albanian Election 2005 – A New Ruling Elite?

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October 2005

Introduction

The general election of July 2005 in Albania was a major test for the Socialist Party administration of Fatos Nano, which had in one form or another been ruling Albania since 1997. The street turmoil of that year had seen the fall of the Democratic Party government of Sali Berisha. Fatos Nano and his party assumed power in very controversial elections in June 1997. Subsequently, in 2001 the Socialist Party had been returned to power in a disputed election, but with a reduced majority.¹

The conduct of that election was a considerable improvement over the 1997 poll. It was nevertheless criticized by the international community representatives in Tirana, and it took several weeks for a final result to emerge after many recounts in some constituencies.

In the election this year, the Socialists were peacefully displaced from power, and a Democratic Party led coalition has become the new government. The election in general had a more favourable 'conduct report' from the international community than the 2001 poll, despite a number of violent incidents on polling day. A small number of rerun polls necessary in late August went smoothly and without incident. In that sense, the election marks another positive step forward for Albania along the road to integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions. The main issue occupying the International Community (IC) is whether Dr Sali Berisha will be able to run a stable functional government as a result, and what degree of political change can be expected given the number of largely unknown new people in higher posts. There are no significant outstanding policy differences between the two governments on the major issues of the EU and NATO.

Context - A Surprise Result For The International Community

The years 2002 to 2005 have seen a process of stabilization and some economic progress in Albania. The post-2001 Socialist Party government had one main achievement: a better relationship with the European Union. As a result it was able to open talks on an EU Accession Agreement and develop processes towards the opening of full membership negotiations. Although unemployment and social deprivation remain major problems, a new and assertive middle class

has developed, mainly resting on the new business culture in Tirana, the associated lowlands and the south. Tirana itself has been transformed under its progressive Mayor, Edi Rama. In the north, apart from a developing area around Shkodra, social and economic conditions remain poor. In the security orbit, relations with NATO continue to be fruitful and NATO is satisfied with the military reform processes.

However, although corruption and illegality remained serious problems in the Nano years, the prevailing view in the majority of the international community was that the new inflow of money from the EU and rapid economic progress in the capital and the lowlands would be sufficient to re-elect Nano. This was incorrect. Public objections to the atmosphere and practice of the Nano government turned out to be serious enough to overturn the Socialist majority on polling day and provide a working majority for the opposition Democratic Party (DP), led by Dr Sali Berisha. This majority depends on an alliance with a number of smaller parties, mainly the Republican Party. The Socialist Movement for Integration party of Ilir Meta which had enjoyed strong IC backing in the 2003-2005 period did not make the impression on the electorate the IC expected outside Meta's home region of central southern Albania.

The Republican Party is the party of many Kosova-descent families, the displaced Cameria refugees and moderate nationalist opinion. The Cam campaign in 2003-2004 played a major part in turning the atmosphere on some national issues connected with the Cams dispute with Greece into an election vote loser for Nano. The Socialists polled noticeably badly in areas of the south where in the past they had held a dominant position but where there is a Cam community.²

In the same way, Kosovar interests failed to back the Socialists to any significant degree. Although Nano had recently taken up various rhetorical positions in favour of Kosova independence, there is no doubt the vast majority of Kosovars resident or economically active in Albania feel much happier that their interests will be protected under a Berisha government.

It was also felt in the Tirana diplomatic community that Berisha still had the major handicap of the chaos of 1997 and 'pyramid banking' crisis to overcome, and that memories of that time would be a big handicap to his election ambitions. This did not turn out to be the case. A new business and political elite is emerging in Tirana, who want Western-style business culture and have no links with the bureaucratic elite left from the past.

A whole new generation of young voters has appeared on the scene that were too young to be affected by the 1997 crisis and armed uprising, and had no inhibitions about voting for Dr Berisha. The Socialist Party had allowed a local taxation culture to grow up that with a mixture of red tape and corruption caused the closure of many small Tirana businesses. The very large amount of new legislation passed under the Nano government in the name of resisting corruption, tax avoidance and organized crime had, on the ground, provided a perfect climate for the coercive and often corrupt local enforcement agencies.

Other voters decided that the risk of problems with Dr Berisha was worth taking in order to oust Nano, and in that sense, the result was a defeat for Nano as much as a victory for Berisha. Other handicaps suffered by the Socialists were the perceived closeness of Nano himself with unpopular southern neighbour Greece, the failure to have good relations with increasingly influential Kosova interest groups in Albania, the failure to make progress with the new road linking Tirana with Kosova, the failure to have an effective policy against major criminality, and still widespread infrastructure problems. These are focussed in the popular mind on power cuts and water supply issues. A very rich elite linked to Greek business interests had been formed under Nano, which appeared to be both beyond the rule of law and subject to the dictates of an outside power.

A New Democratic Party?

In the aftermath of the election, interest has naturally focussed on how far the DP has moved from its previous period in government, 1992-1996, when it was seen as dominated by an unpredictable Dr Berisha. His leadership of the opposition from 1997 to about 2002 was also seen as irresponsible by many IC figures, with frequent use of street protests against Nano and boycotts of Parliament. In fact a fairly extensive modernization of the party has occurred, drawing mostly on the new educated and ambitious youth of the diaspora. There are indications that Dr Berisha's central ambition is to resume the Presidency he was forced to resign in 1997, and this may moderate his stronger political instincts.

The main feature of the new government is the youth and inexperience of many ministers, with the exception of a few well-known figures like Finance Minister Ridvan Bode, who held the same position in 1996-1997 during the final period of the last DP government. Few of the new ministers have held any public position at all, and in that sense, the government represents the first predominantly new administration since the end of communism in 1991. The majority have lived and studied in the diaspora since the mid-1990s, for varying periods, often in US, Turkish or French universities, and in that sense they represent a radical new departure from the traditional, often Socialist-oriented Tirana elite who in the post-communist period after 1990 have dominated most governments and senior posts in public bodies. A familiar complaint against the first DP government was that it was northern-dominated and lacking in people with intellectual credentials. This problem has been squarely faced and may have been at least partly solved.

The ideology of the new governing elite is likely to be subtly different from the European-oriented economist technocracy of the Nano era. First pronouncements of the government have had a distinctly neo-conservative atmosphere, with a strong emphasis on law and order, anti-corruption drives, extending the power of the state to tap and record mobile phone messages, and the familiar agenda of the US neo-con 'strong state' interest. The danger with this process is that if top figures from Nano's party (or Nano himself) are targeted in corruption allegations, the relatively positive current inter-party

atmosphere following the election could deteriorate rapidly.

Advice from the international community has focused on the need to try to consolidate the economic achievements of the Nano years and avoid antagonizing Greece and Greek business interests in Albania, and to proceed on a steady course of economic reform. It remains to be seen how this defence of the 1990s economic establishment can be reconciled with popular demands to clamp down on corruption. There is likely to be a 'honeymoon' period of some length, when these different ideological approaches to the problems of running and reforming Albania will coexist.

In the consolidation of Albanian democracy post-1997, a whole network of informal power relationships and economic structures have developed, with a strong financial input from crime and the 'gray' economy. As they now contribute substantially to the rapid economic growth rate, it is very unlikely that any anti-corruption drive will extend very far, and the announcements of the new government seem more likely to be designed to impress the IC than anything else.

The main policy issue in the next period on the domestic front is likely to be connected with this issue. It is impossible to forecast what the priorities of the government will be in detail.

Changes In The Socialist Party/The Cam Factor

In the post-election period, there have been major changes in the Socialist Party leadership. The Nano leadership has disappeared and has been replaced by a new leadership group, led by the Mayor of Tirana, Edi Rama, although several top posts are currently being contested and the outcome is uncertain in some cases. Rama is likely to try to take the party in a generally centrist direction. In an important development, the General Secretary of the party, Grammos Ruci, has gone from this key post.³ He was the figure perhaps most directly associated with the 'Greek' wing of the leadership, and was the main architect of the very narrow defeat of the Cam motion in the Parliament in 2004. He had been Nano's State Security Minister in the 1998-1999 period, although his career in Interior Ministry work dated back to the one-party state period and the Alia government of 1990-91.

Figures in the old leadership such as ex-Defence Minister Pandeli Majko who are generally seen in a positive light by the IC have been retained in leading positions, and ex-President Rexhep Meidani continues to play a stabilising 'elder statesman' role.⁴ The good conduct of the exit process of Nano and some of his close associates is likely to find favour with the IC and will enable an improvement in the functioning of the opposition in Parliament.

A Small Shift Eastwards?

In a sense, much less change will be noticed on the regional and international scene from a change of government in Tirana than could have been expected

three or four years ago. The main changes are likely to be in a more pro-American foreign policy and less interest in exact coordination with the European Union on every issue, now that full membership is becoming an increasing distant prospect. The new elite will try to extract whatever financial and other benefits there are from the EU process while attempting to disguise from the EU the probable lack of real progress on local reform issues.

In that sense, the relationship between Albania and the EU will follow the traditional pattern of Albania-superpower relations going back many years, some would say to the foundation of the state in the World War I period. This is not to suggest the new government will be anything but pro-European, and the ongoing relationships with the European Union will of course continue, but in the new atmosphere post the end of the proposed EU constitution and in a climate where rapid enlargement of the Union is very unlikely. Nano and the Socialists had nailed their colours to the mast of very rapid progress in this process, and the French and Dutch votes were a significant background factor in the Tirana Socialists' election defeat.

The new government is much more closely oriented towards Turkey and the moderate Moslem world than its predecessor, and it was significant that the first foreign visit made by Dr Berisha after assuming power was to Ankara. This will also benefit relations with the new Kosova, and it can be expected that in the political talks process for Kosova that is soon due to start, the new government will take a more interested and pro-active role than might have been expected from Nano's administration. Policy difference is not an issue; all Albanian political parties now stand for an independent Kosova. The subsequent September visit of Dr Berisha to the powerful US diaspora community in New York City was a success. It remains to be seen how capable the new DP government will be in relating to the always strong nationalist agenda of the US Albanian diaspora on issues such as the human rights of the Albanians in Montenegro, an increasingly visible issue there, and other aspects of the Albanian national question

The opening of EU talks with Turkey will assist Dr Berisha in breaking away from the Greek stranglehold over many Tirana government functions. It remains to be seen whether the new government will be capable of tackling the parallel structures of power exercised by the Greeks through the security apparatus and the police, particularly in the south.

Although a reopening of relations with the Islamic Conference is unlikely, there is likely to be a more sympathetic atmosphere for the moderate Muslim majority in Albania than in some periods in the recent past where that aspect of the national religious heritage appeared to be under intense pressure from expanding Greek Orthodoxy, closely interlinked with leading figures in Nano's party apparatus.

The Immediate Future

In general the election of Dr Berisha has been welcomed as a sign that the

peaceful transition of power in Albania is now normal and a sign of political progress since the years of turmoil in the late 1990s. There is unlikely to be major change on any domestic policy issue, or radical reorientation. It would be a mistake, however, in the field of foreign policy to see the return of a DP government as unimportant. The election, along with the coming political status process for Kosova represents a potentially considerable extension of hitherto marginal Turkish and international moderate Muslim influence in the southern Balkan region, and presents Greece with significant challenges in evolving a relationship with both Dr Berisha's Albania and the new Kosova over the next three or four years in a climate where Athens's influence over EU issues is likely to be a much weaker policy lever than in the past.

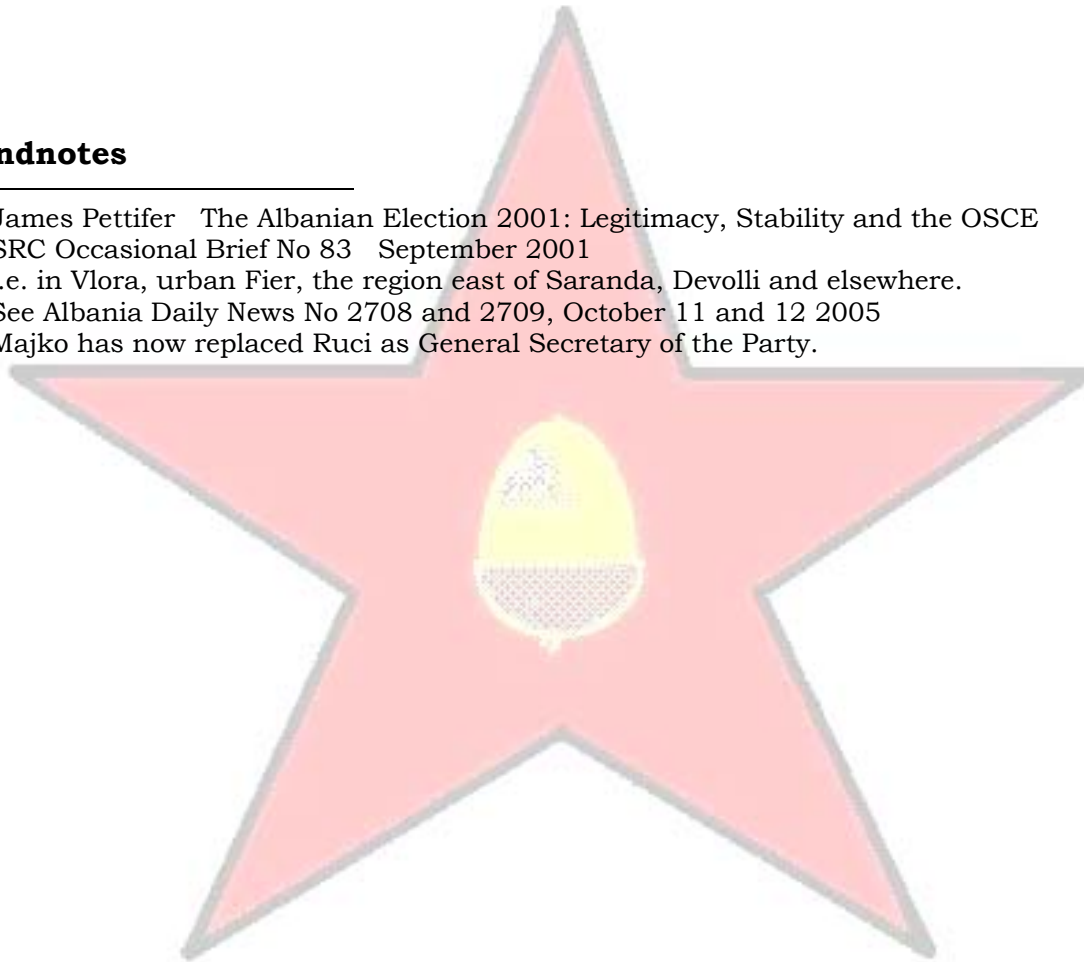
Endnotes

¹ James Pettifer The Albanian Election 2001: Legitimacy, Stability and the OSCE CSRC Occasional Brief No 83 September 2001

² i.e. in Vlora, urban Fier, the region east of Saranda, Devolli and elsewhere.

³ See Albania Daily News No 2708 and 2709, October 11 and 12 2005

⁴ Majko has now replaced Ruci as General Secretary of the Party.



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