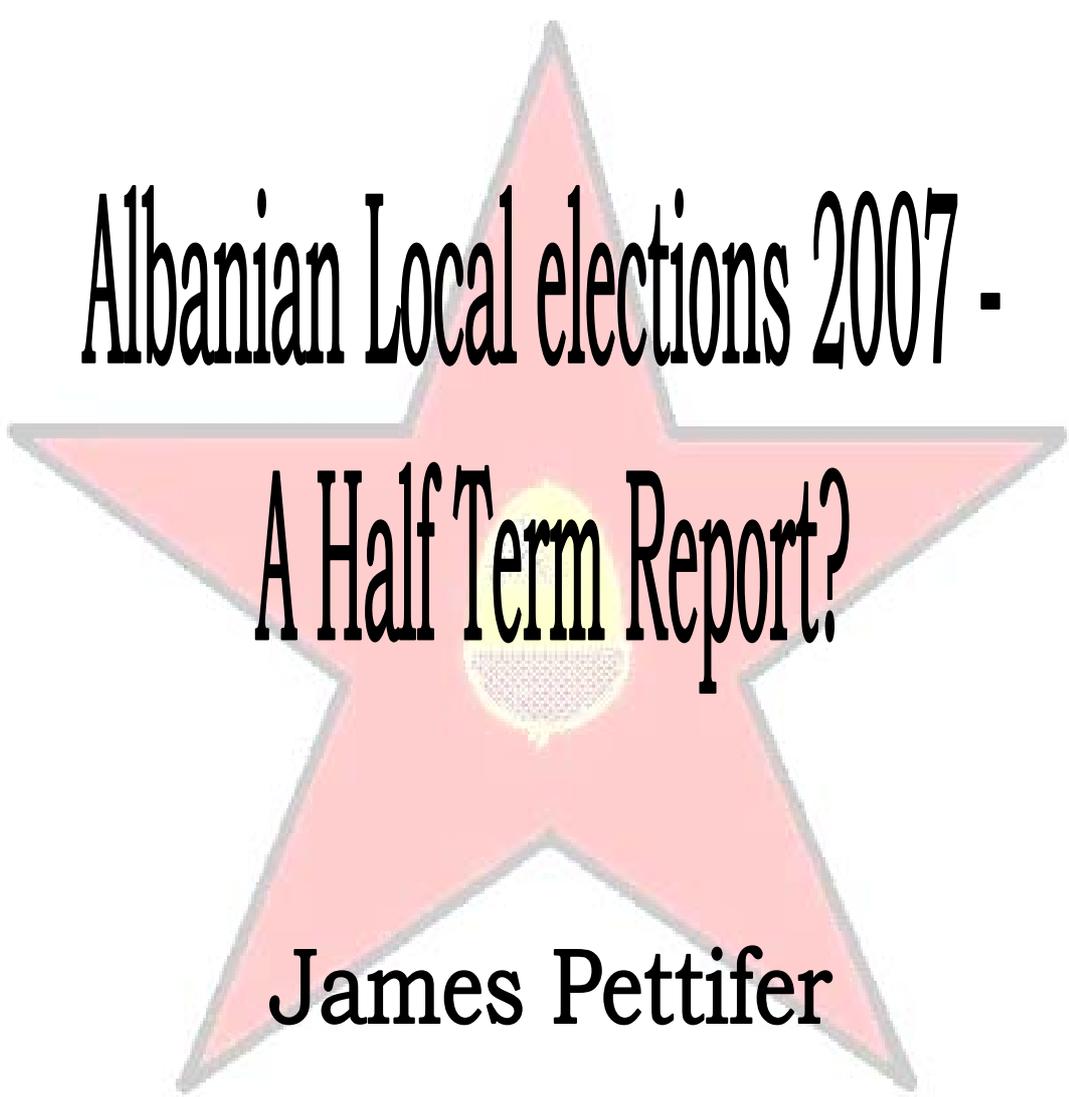


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**Albanian Local elections 2007 -
A Half Term Report?**

James Pettifer

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Defence Academy of the United Kingdom

Albanian Local Elections – A Half Term Report?

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Key Points

- * The Albanian local poll of spring 2007 indicates a revival in support for the opposition Socialist Party.
- * The weaknesses in the conduct of the poll indicate elements of the democratic deficit still existing in Albania.
- * Good economic progress is not being matched by similar improvements in the political and cultural superstructure.
- * Progress towards the European Union is not likely to be speeded up in the foreseeable future.

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Introduction

The victory of the Democratic Party (DP) in Albania in the summer 2005 national parliamentary elections brought Dr Sali Berisha back to power as Prime Minister. His party had been in a long period of opposition following the ejection of the DP from power in the chaos following the pyramid banking crisis of 1996-1997. The 2005 victory had been unexpected in many international community quarters, as the Socialists, led by Fatos Nano, were seen as having a firm hold on the levers of power, and to have brought considerable amounts of European Union money into the country in a climate of stabilisation and economic improvement.

In the event, this was not the case, and voters were not impressed by much of the Socialist leadership, and the alleged corruption in the Nano circle and close links with Greece were a marked handicap in the campaign. The Cham issue had been gaining a new importance in Albanian politics since about 2002-2003, and in many southern constituencies in towns such as Saranda and Vlora, Cham voters solidly backed Berisha in the hope of more progress in opening talks with Greece on a settlement. In the background were the serious infrastructure and transition-period problems. Despite the European Union money and closer institutional links, with various pre-accession agreements being signed, many citizens still live in grinding poverty with major infrastructure problems in supply of water and electricity, another major contributor to the Socialist defeat. The new prosperity and urban improvement in Tirana has not been widely experienced elsewhere.

A priority for the European Union and other international community agencies has been to improve the functioning of the electoral process in Albania. Although there has been considerable progress since the difficult poll in summer 1997 and contested referendum on the return of the monarchy, most elections held since have been marred, to a lesser or greater extent, by violent incidents and local poll irregularities such as ballot stuffing, difficulties with the electoral register, problems with counting the votes, and impersonation of voters. Some of these problems have been seen by the international community as peculiarly 'Albanian' problems, linked to corruption, while others are the result of rapid internal migration, mostly from the north and mountainous regions towards the booming Tirana and Dures region. This causes major administrative problems with updating the register, linked to the large number of non resident émigré voters. Underlying these factors was, and is, the continuing poor relations and distrust between Right and Left, government and opposition, that permeate the political system.

It is sometimes forgotten that Albania had little or no tradition of parliamentary/party democracy at all in the twentieth century until the difficult period of transition from communism after 1990. In the main, though, these problems have not been on a sufficient scale to prevent a fair result emerging, if sometimes rough and ready, whether in local elections under the Socialists post-

1997, or in the smooth and peaceful transfer to power of the Democratic Party in the national elections in summer 2005. As elsewhere in both eastern and western Europe, there has been a declining level of participation in the electoral process since the very high numbers recorded in the crisis poll of summer 1997.

The Democratic Party Government

Many international community figures involved with Albania expressed concern about the return of Dr Sali Berisha to power in 2005, at least in private. The legacy of the Berisha years and the chaos and popular uprising of 1997 were not very far in the past; the Socialists after 1997 had established a reputation as reasonably competent, if often corrupt, and there has been quite substantial economic progress in 1998-2004, with high growth rates, the extraordinary achievements of urban renewal in Tirana, and major improvements in lowland road communications. The personality of Dr Berisha was a main issue in these perceptions, with memories of semi-violent and chaotic street protests by the DP in the post-1997 period, human rights violations against political opponents, the violence and coup attempt in Tirana during September 1998.¹

There were also fears about basic competence in government, as many of the new ministers were young and inexperienced, part of an attempt by the DP to get away from leading figures associated with the debacle in 1997, and have a new and better image. The DP initiative was also an attempt to get away from links with the entrenched Tirana bureaucracy in the government ministries, most of whom were believed by the DP to be more or less openly linked to the Socialists and other non-DP political interests. It was also a project of genuine political modernisation, in that many of the new figures (who had often studied abroad, many in the United States) were untainted by associations with the communist or immediate post-communist past, and were not particularly linked to the Berisha or other DP leaders' families or extended families' interests, by blood or by geography. The more intelligent people in the DP leadership knew major errors had been made in the 1992-1997 period in government, and were anxious not to repeat them.

Some of these ambitions have been fulfilled in the last two years. A number of the new young ministers and advisers found their feet quickly and were able to run effective government posts. Some of the most questionable figures from the Nano period were removed from influence, and proceedings were started against a few, such as the ex-public prosecutor. There has been continuing progress on transport works, with the key road linking Tirana with Kosovo starting construction, and new work under way linking southern cities with improved road routes. The highway linking Tirana, Elbasan and the Macedonian border at Quaf e Thanës has been completed, bringing a dramatic improvement in travel times between Albania and western Macedonia with its many ethnic Albanian inhabitants. In foreign policy, the swings and errors of 1992-1997 have been avoided, with a carefully balanced approach to the main 'problem' neighbour, Greece, and with Dr Berisha not involving himself very directly in Greek-Albanian relations. Kosovo policy has been carefully orchestrated to support independence, without any hint of nationalist militancy or irresponsibility. The economy has continued to do well, and Tirana now is a booming, aggressively growing city, with one of the highest growth rates and property prices anywhere in eastern Europe.

The Electorate was not Convinced

In these circumstances, the DP might have been expected to approach the local polls in a spirit of some optimism. In fact this was not the case, something the results for the party bore out. It was not possible for some time to even reach an agreement on the polling date, and the eventual February date was more or less forced on the government by the international community in Tirana. On the day, there were about 1700 candidates, and 4500 observers, foreign and domestic. The poll produced a low turnout of about 47% and a series of devastating blows to the DP, with the loss of every major city to the Socialists' coalition (SP), even northern strongholds of the Right such as Shkodra - the DP only managed to hold on to places like Berat partly as a result of splits in the SP/Opposition vote linked to the regional influence of Ilir Meta's centre-left party. Although on paper it was not such a bad result on a statistical basis, with the DP-led right coalition obtaining about 49% of the vote against 41% for the left coalition, the DP did very badly indeed in the major urban centres and only gained support in some small towns and rural localities.

The international community verdict was one of grudging acceptance, with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe commenting along the lines that the result was undoubtedly a fair representation of popular opinion, but there were many local irregularities and problems with voters being excluded from the electoral register.² The poll was a particular triumph for Socialist leader and Mayor of Tirana Edi Rama, who had managed to displace Fatos Nano from the party leadership after the 2005 defeat, and was elected to a third term as mayor of the capital.

Change and Continuities in Albanian Politics

Underlying the poll result were the reinscription of some longstanding factors in Albanian politics. The country remains deeply divided between Right and Left. The small 'centre' parties only exist insofar as their leaders can engage support from the Tirana diplomatic community. The Socialist Party can clearly draw on deep reserves of support among the maybe 60-70% of the population who still live in real poverty and who have not benefited much, if at all, from the Tirana region's economic boom. The SP has a good electoral machine over the whole country, with committed supporters from the old political tradition who are a network of contacts, influence and patronage in even the smallest and most remote communities, which in significant parts of central and southern Albania, particularly some big towns, the DP does not have, or not to the same extent.

The massive infrastructure problems of water and electricity supply remain as bad as ever in many places, and it was unfortunate for the DP that a particularly dry six months had preceded the poll, with reduced hydroelectricity generation. These problems particularly affect the urban population. The much vaunted power sharing network set up by British and Serbian interests after the overthrow of Milosevic has signally failed to improve electricity supply in Albania and many other places in the region, linked to global warming factors affecting snowfall and rainfall, and also the closure of Bulgarian generating capacity.³ The Berisha government had failed to close the contract originally negotiated with the SP over the new Vlora thermal station, to be financed by the World Bank, something that was only achieved in March 2007, after the poll.

Although the local poll is not a terminal setback for Albanian European Union ambitions, it is bound to cause concern in Brussels and elsewhere. Many international figures have concluded that Albania had not met reasonable standards for fair elections, although it is possible some of these judgements may have been affected by disappointment that the DP did not do better in the poll.⁴ The political elite in Tirana remains in many ways unchanged, with Nano still an influential figure in the SP background and local power structures, Berisha having been restrained from the worst excesses of the 1992-1997 period but still not offering models of major achievement on many issues, and a modus operandi of government that is often very isolated from the concerns of the great majority of the people. The real power structures in any communities depend on local figures, some with interests in the grey and black economy, and with increasing power as a result of the Tirana and coastal economic boom.

The increasing economic interlinks in industries like insurance and banking with other parts of the Albanian world, principally Kosovo and western Macedonia, are bound to increase the polycentric nature of current Albanian development, in all fields. In the world of culture, for instance, thirty years ago virtually all publication of books in the Albanian language took place in Tirana; now there are at least seven or eight separate publication centres. The imminent independence decision on Kosovo is bound to focus many economic decisions by investors outside Albania, but drawing upon the new open borders of a language community of over six million consumers.⁵ This is likely in time to cause the modification of much US and some NATO policy, which has sought to build up Tirana as 'the' capital of all Albanians, and to focus political attention and economic aid accordingly. The whole process is an interesting example of the wider problem for the US in imposing positive pro-globalisation values on small countries where the political elite is very pro-USA and a reliable ally, but where the economic juggernaut of globalisation is seen at popular level to contribute little to the development of democracy, cultural identity and local empowerment. The Bush administration's preoccupation with 'strong states' only accentuates this process, as far more money goes to anti-crime and law and order than it does to economic development, health and education.

In terms of EU enlargement issues, the election is bound to focus interest on the difficult conundrum of the future of the Western Balkans, in a climate where further enlargement of any kind is becoming increasingly problematic. It indicates that while Albania is developing well economically, with the kind of transformation in central Tirana over the last five years that has astounded many visitors, this has not been matched by similar positive changes in the political culture and state functioning. Although this problem is perhaps most pronounced in Albania, it also affects Montenegro, Bosnia, Macedonia and Serbia. It seems inevitable that within the European Union, the Austrian viewpoint that an interim membership status is needed for the Western Balkans, Turkey and Croatia in the absence of any real prospect for full membership in the near future will gain more support. An interim status would in fact be stabilising and assist reform, by removing the burden of continual over-sanguine promises and failed expectation from local political elites, and encouraging them to see themselves as really responsible for their own nations, rather than relying on a 'European' solution to problems appearing like a Homeric god from the sky.

Local pressure for a formal invitation for Albania to join NATO is likely to increase as a result, particularly as defence reform (as in Macedonia) has been one of the more successful aspects of both the current DP government and also its SP predecessor. Albanian soldiers continue to serve and play a useful support role in US-led coalitions in Iraq and elsewhere.

The Diaspora

The vote showed the influential diaspora, particularly in the USA, that the old days of unchallenged Right dominance in Tirana were over. The lobby within the diaspora for a 'strong man at the top' who would take Albania out of poverty and economic difficulty very rapidly had been shown to be wrong in the 1997 debacle, but lingering support had remained for this hope in the US, particularly among émigré families descended from those active in the anti-communist fight around the end of World War II. It indicates that the much-criticised US Embassy in Tirana line to keep open all links with the SP leadership has been based on a realistic appreciation of the underlying forces in Albanian politics.⁶ The Berisha government has in fact made very little difference to most Albanian political life in the last two years, in any structural sense, unlike the DP government between 1992 and 1997. The government's capacity to try for a 'strong state' solution, along mid-1990s lines, has been further inhibited by the growing diversity of the media, which makes debate hard to control.⁷

The Future of the DP Government

A positive feature of the poll was the peaceful and conciliatory approach adopted by the government, with Dr Berisha commenting that what mattered was that this was a victory for democracy, and the government has continued to function much as usual, with major problems in parliament and ministerial appointments, but none of this affecting the economy or social stability. It is likely that the government will try to evolve a more effective energy policy, although the long lead times for energy investments do not make it likely that this problem will be much affected in the two years before the next parliamentary elections. The Socialist party is likely to distance itself from potential coalition partners before the July 2009 elections as on current form there is a real possibility of an outright majority for the SP, which can then rule alone. In that sense, the main immediate losers from the 2007 local poll may not be the DP as much as the 'centre' parties encouraged by the international community such as that of Meta, and also the Social Democrats. The Cham party was split during the campaign, with the main Tirana leadership part of the Right coalition led by the DP and Berisha, but in some localities, e.g. Saranda, the Chams supported the Socialists, given the DP's local alliance with the pro-Greek Human Rights party of the Greek speaking minority in the south west.

This is perhaps also a significant indicator from the poll, showing the power of the Cham issue to change the electoral agenda in the south and towns like Vlora, where Cham votes played an important part in Berisha's 2005 national poll victory, but where the Cham vote was much less important in this election.

It remains to be seen how power relations will develop in the period leading up to the elections for a new President in summer 2007. So far, all that can be said with certainty is that the international community would strongly prefer to have a dignified, non-party President along the lines of ex-Presidents Rexhep Meidani and Alfred Moisiu, but the reviving Socialists are likely to use the poll as an opportunity to put pressure on the DP government, in general.

Endnotes

¹ see The Albanian Question by James Pettifer and Miranda Vickers for more detail on the 1997-1998 crisis, I.B.Tauris, London, 2006, Palgrave -Macmillan, New York 2007

² See OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Interim Report 4, 25 February 2007.

³ Most Albanian power comes from hydroelectric dams built in the communist period. A number of new small schemes have been proposed but there is little scope for dramatic increases in power generation by this route. Snowfall has always been a major part of precipitation in many Balkan countries, and the milder, drier winters of recent years are causing major problems.

⁴ see, for instance, European Forum, 'Albania Update', 6 March, www.europeanforum.net/country/albania, and relevant OSCE and European Union material e.g. 'Statement of the European Union on Local Elections held in Albania on 18 February 2007' www.eu2007.de/en/News

⁵ See The Economist, London, 20 January 2007, p.36, 'What Happened to Greater Albania?'

⁶ Thus, it appears, at the time of writing, as if ex Prime Minister Fatos Nano is going to run for President in the approaching elections, a development that would have been difficult to imagine only two years ago.

⁷ In the mid-1990s, there were six substantial newspapers, now there are over twenty; several different television channels and many local radio stations, and good Internet availability except in the most remote rural regions. In the US Republican Right orbit, organisations like the Heritage Foundation which were strong backers for the first Berisha government between 1992 and 1997 seem to take much less interest in events now. In today's climate of 'clash of civilisations' conflicts, majority Muslim Albania is not such an attractive prospect for the Christian Right, either.

Want to Know More ...?

See:

The Albanian Question by James Pettifer and Miranda Vickers, I.B.Tauris, London, 2006, Palgrave -Macmillan, New York 2007

The Economist, London, 20 January 2007, p.36, 'What Happened to Greater Albania?'

James Pettifer, "Albanian Elections 2005", *Conflict Studies Research Centre*, Balkans Series, 05/60, October 2005.

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