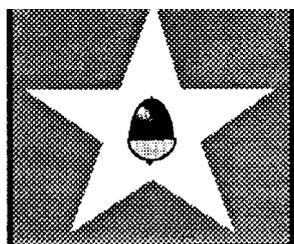


Conflict Studies Research Centre

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**The Albanian Election 2001:
Legitimacy, Stability & The OCSE**

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The Albanian Election 2001: Legitimacy, Stability & The OSCE

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Synopsis

The Socialist Party victory in the Albanian elections was widely welcomed by the International Community (IC), albeit prematurely. Corrupt practices in the second and subsequent rounds went largely unreported in the interests of 'stability'. Yet the activity of the OSCE and the IC in managing political elites in Albania and elsewhere may lead to less legitimacy in government and frustrated nationalism.

The Albanian General Election held on June 24th 2001 with subsequent second round voting in July has not attracted much attention in the international community or the media, with interest in the Balkan region overshadowed by the violence and profound political crisis in FYROM. The vast majority of external powers, including the US and the European Union, had wished to see the continuation of the Socialist party in power in Tirana, and the defeat of the right wing opposition Union for Victory alliance led by ex-President Sali Berisha. The basis for this policy is the general belief in the international community is that the Socialists are less nationalistic than the Right, and that their main political basis in southern Albania with its Greek links is generally isolated from Kosovo and FYROM-based nationalistic radicalism.

In terms of society and the economy, the Socialists have seen a return to economic growth, interrupted by the pyramid banking crisis of 1996-97, a reduction in crime and an improvement in public security. As a result, considerable public relations help was given to the incumbent Socialists by leading Western political figures, with Tirana Prime Minister Ilir Meta enjoying a photo-opportunity with US President George W Bush a few days before polling began. European Union financed infrastructure schemes were advanced in the months before the election, and road building in particular brought benefits to the Socialist party in key lowland areas, where over 2 million of Albania's 2.5 million voters live.

The conduct of the first round of the election received the general approval of the international community, in the form of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).¹ The main concern of the international community was that polling should take place peacefully, which in the great

majority of places was the case. This is in contrast to the violence that marked the 1997 elections, which were won overwhelmingly by the Socialists in the aftermath of the anarchy in Albania in the spring of that year.² The turnout in the election was low, only 54% on the first round of voting, and the campaign was marked by a sense of public disillusion with politicians, particularly the long-standing and bitter personal and political conflict between Socialist Party Chairman Fatos Nano and ex-President Sali Berisha, who gaoled Nano for a period when he was in power between 1992 and 1997. The low turnout figure was affected by the fact that many Albanians live and work abroad, and absentee voting is not allowed. Albania uses a mixed 'first-past-the-post' and proportional system, for a Parliament with 140 seats.

The first round results indicated that the Socialist Party had won an overwhelming victory, although opinion polls taken in the month before the poll had shown diminishing leads for the Socialists.³ According to these results, the Socialist party had won 74 seats and the Democratic Party-led coalition just 26. The OSCE media operation heavily promoted this view and many international observers left the country very soon after this first poll, seeing the result as a forgone conclusion. This was despite the fact that the share of the votes was quite close, about 42% for the Socialists and 38% for the Right, and where a number of small parties who are normally allies of the Socialists had not done well enough to cross the threshold to gain parliamentary representation. The 'Democratic Party' of ex-Berisha aide Genc Pollo had scored 5.1%, with many voters probably mistaking the name of this party for the Berisha-led coalition, as the international backers of this party no doubt intended. Dr Berisha is therefore justified in his claims that on the first round of voting there was actually a non-Socialist numerical majority in the poll. The Opposition alleged that the Central Election Commission was favouring the government, and on 25 June Prime Minister Meta announced that the Socialists had won. A key issue in this election was the size of the victory, where a main objective for the Democrats and their allies was to obtain at least 57 parliamentary seats, which would be sufficient to block Socialist leader Fatos Nano in his ambitions to become the next Albanian President. Current President Rexhep Meidani is due to stand down in 2002.

As a result of the allegations of the Opposition, repeat polls were held in some constituencies on 8 July and then subsequently, and these were very controversial in Albania, with the minority of remaining international observers seeing widespread irregularities, such as ballot stuffing, police intimidation of voters, and interference with the work of election commission members. Both sides were involved in these corrupt practices but there is no doubt that the Socialist Party benefited much more from them than the Democrats. A key factor was the fear of the police in many Socialist Party controlled areas that they would be vulnerable to job losses and personal violence in revenge for their role in ousting the Democratic Party (DP) in the 1997 anarchy period.

Further polls were held in contested constituencies, and by the end of the protracted ballot process the OSCE had revised aspects of its original estimate of the election, but allowed it to stand overall.⁴ The political effect of this process was clear, in that all measures of the share of the vote indicate that the country was roughly evenly divided before, during, and after the election, and that an election on a straight proportional basis would have produced an indecisive result, as can often happen in democracies. Such a result would have frustrated both the Presidential ambitions of Fatos Nano, but more importantly for the OSCE, those in the international community (IC), who wished to see a 'decisive' government. The received view in the IC is that 'instability' in Tirana would lead to a resurgence of Albanian nationalism in the context of the developing conflicts in FYROM and the unresolved status of Kosovo. Is this the case? Is the conceptual framework of the IC actually based on Albanian political reality? Regional reactions are important in this context.

Regional Reactions

The re-election of the Socialists had been keenly supported by all neighbouring countries, but the result is a setback for the regional influence of Italy, with the traditional close Italian links to the Democratic Party and the Kosovo Democratic League of Dr Rugova in Pristina. A key election slogan for the Right coalition was 'Bush, Berlusconi, Berisha', where the DP hoped to benefit from the swing to the Right in some recent Western elections. This did not take place on a large enough scale to give the DP victory. The result is a major victory for Greece, with the very close personal, business and political links between Athens and many Tirana government figures likely to be maintained. The government in Belgrade welcomed the result privately, as the decision of the Socialists in Tirana to reopen diplomatic relations had been heavily criticized by the DP in opposition, and could well have been countermanded if Berisha had won the election. Thus the IC support for Nano's Socialists is one dimension of the wider policy in some parts of the IC to restore Belgrade hegemony in the politics of the region.

In Kosovo, the Socialists' main link is with the party of Hashim Thaci, whereas a DP victory in Albania would have been a minor boost to Dr Ibrahim Rugova. Tirana Prime Minister Meta made a surprisingly successful visit to Kosovo in December 2000, and has initiated a number of processes that may lead to much closer economic links over a period of time. It appears that the good Socialist results in a few northern constituencies, such as Kukes, were influenced by Kosovo factors, with the booming trade with Kosovo from hitherto dormant towns in the north an assistance to the incumbent Socialists who control the border and the Customs, often in de facto alliance with figures in Kosovo either in Thaci's party, or close to it. These are, in essence, the developing and dynamic forces in Kosovo and northern Albanian politics, and are likely to call into serious question the widespread view in the international community that the Socialists have significantly different underlying Kosovo and FYROM policies from the

Democrats. The reality of Albanian nationalism is that it is polycentric and needs a stable and respectable government in Tirana that is not threatened by political turmoil and conflict on the margins of the Albanian world. Nor does the history of the previous Berisha government support the IC view. While in power before 1997, Dr Berisha followed the instructions of the leading Tirana Ambassadors over Kosovo, even to the point of trying to arrest various leading Kosovo Liberation Army figures resident in Albania, and was widely criticized in the Kosovo political world for doing so. Any Tirana government has to ostensibly toe the IC line in order to obtain foreign funding, and supporters of militant Albanian nationalism have many and effective parallel structure channels to promote their aims, particularly in northern Albania. These structures are almost totally unaffected by the balance of power in the Tirana parliament. For instance, until recently a key FYROM Albanian political leader such as Arben Xhaferi, probably the ablest Albanian politician in the region, had never even met many Socialist party leaders in Tirana.⁵

In these complex circumstances, the result was welcomed in Pristina by the ex-KLA wing of the political spectrum, as a Socialist government in Tirana has little effective authority over much of the north, and where it has, as in Kukes, Kosovo financial influence linked to the ex-KLA figures proved to be decisive in the election. A Berisha government could have posed minor problems for the reviving KLA tradition, with no sign in his election campaign that Dr Berisha was in any way self-critical of his previous Kosovo policies. A Socialist government in Tirana means that the dominant police and local state culture in the north is firmly antagonistic to Tirana, and highly unlikely to carry out anti-arms trading or anti-KLA/NLA policies with much effectiveness or enthusiasm.

The Socialists in Tirana have good relations with the Montenegrins, and are likely to avoid any action that could prejudice the possibility of a Montenegrin independence vote at some point before June 2002. Major economic links are underway, with the showpiece fibre optic cable connection the key element in regional cooperation.

In the aftermath of the election, Foreign Minister Pascal Milo made a visit to Belgrade, as part of a Stability Pact-linked initiative. This visit was widely criticized in some sections of the Tirana media, and it remains to be seen if it is more than a symbolic gesture towards the Belgrade regime. Although this visit was seen as a major landmark by some in the international community, it should be borne in mind that Milo only made it as part of his Stability Pact role, not purely as Tirana Foreign Minister.

As far as the conflict in Macedonia is concerned, the government of Meta took a very distant role vis à vis the ambitions of the FYROM Albanians. It has clearly been embarrassed by the conflict and did not until recently appear to realize how serious it had become. Even planning for refugees and displaced persons had been desultory, and the government was criticized in the press for this. NATO border monitors have been allowed to operate in Albania, and for the reasons outlined above the government will no doubt

continue to say whatever the international community expects it to, according to the political circumstances of the time, but with very little practical effect on political or military events.

The OSCE & Government Legitimacy

During the period of the period of the Berisha government between 1992 and 1997, the international community sought to safeguard the transition in the post-communist period in Albania by building up a strong central Presidency around Dr Berisha himself. In the aftermath of the chaos in 1997, and the need for an international peacekeeping force, it was generally agreed by most commentators that the Berisha project had been inflated, and the need for parliamentary opposition and the development of civil society had been underestimated. The IC had become fixated on the presence of Berisha as President as an answer to all problems in Albania, to the detriment of the development of a functioning democracy enjoying popular legitimacy. The election of 1997 had been highly controversial, as was natural in the circumstances, and there was also a widespread feeling among many commentators that the OSCE had marginalized the vote on the monarchy in the referendum held at the same time in an unacceptable way. This was another example of IC emphasis on personality as the key determinant of suitability for IC political support in post-communist eastern Europe.

Has this election produced democratic legitimacy for the Socialist Party government? Has the OSCE been an impartial referee or an unconscious – or conscious - patron of one side? The poll has certainly been a good step forward in terms of the very low level of violence, the freedom of media debate and the development of party coalitions. Yet major questions remain about the role of the OSCE and the international observers. In the pre-election year, there was widespread comment in Tirana about the dominance of the Socialist Party in the election supervision bodies. At the time of the poll, many independent local and some international journalists and commentators noted the intense pressure on the media for an early acknowledgement of a Socialist victory, and the more or less open anti-Berisha prejudice displayed by some IC officials. Some groups of international observers, such as part of the Council of Europe delegation, were heavily 'managed' by local interests close to the Socialist Party, or ambassadors with strong regional interests. There was no international media interest at all in the second and successive rounds of voting, and very few OSCE observers were present.

Control of electoral data is a key tool in the OSCE modus operandi. As in the Belgrade election in December 2000 and the Kosovo local elections two months before, it was very difficult for analysts to obtain precise data, promptly, from the OSCE about voting in many constituencies, a technique which appears to have become more and more widely adopted by the OSCE as a 'spin' technique. Sharing data rapidly on an open and transparent basis promotes informed discussion of the results, but may of course add to local political controversy from aggrieved parties involved.

The number of constituencies won by the Socialists with very small, often tiny, majorities have meant that a few thousand voters have determined the future of the country. This, of course, can happen in one form or another in the most advanced democracies, as events in the USA in Florida last winter showed, and is not a negative reflection on Albanian democracy, but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that in their urge for a 'stable' government in Albania, the IC has once again produced a situation where a Tirana government is 'given' a mandate by the IC with a far larger majority than its arithmetical position and basic political strength in the country would justify, in a very similar fashion to the approval given by many sections of the IC to the openly manipulated poll in 1996 in Albania. It would have been perfectly possible for the OSCE to have nullified the result on the basis of pro-Socialist manipulation and police interference in later polling, but this course has not been followed. The risks of unrepresentative and even authoritarian rule are thus encouraged, rather than inter-party cooperation, and the process post-July 2001 has allowed the Socialists to install in Parliament small parties such as the Social-Democrats which are run by ex-communists with Slavophile pasts such as Pascal Milo and Skender Gjenushi. This, in effect, legitimizes the continuation of the ex-nomenclatura element and the communist-period political elite in Albanian society, and encourages the strong anti-communist and anti-Socialist opposition to move into the political underground, reinforcing the world of underground politics of a nationalist bent.

The election has thus produced short-term 'stability' of a sort but there may be a price to be paid, insofar as the Right has much more justified cause for complaint about the 2001 result than with the 1997 election, and Dr Berisha has already said that he plans to boycott parliament and to start street protests against the new government. The local climate in Tirana itself will therefore become more difficult for political moderates, and on the key national issues of Kosovo and the future of FYROM, the international community could well end up with the worst of all worlds, with a Tirana Socialist government with growing financial and business links to the toughest and most militant politicians in Kosovo; and an aggrieved pro-Berisha political underground in nationalist northern Albania with a strong political motive to oppose whatever Tirana tries to do to bring the region fully under its control. It is difficult to imagine a more promising environment for the redevelopment and training of a new Kosova Liberation Army, should the political and military situation require it, in the eyes of nationalists. This is, of course, likely to be determined by the progress of Kosovo in its institutional development and towards independence, and at this stage there is no reason to believe it will occur, given the improving political climate in Kosovo and the national assembly elections to be held in November 2001.

The central dilemma for the OSCE is whether its role is to build genuinely autonomous local democracy in the post-communist countries of eastern Europe, or to act as an agent for the international community to elevate or legitimate favoured local politicians on the basis of a new form of international patronage, a form of globalisation of government. The recent elections in Azerbaijan are another example of this process. In more simple

terms, the OSCE in the Balkans and eastern Europe is drifting towards a role where it becomes used as a suppressor of democracy if popular votes indicate a nationalist majority. As with other forms of globalisation of the economy and society, there is not much indication that it will be very popular with those in the countries concerned who find their ambitions to build new nations and escape the false internationalism of the communist period frustrated.

This should be a subject of particular interest to, and debate within, the British armed forces and NATO, as it seems more and more likely that they will be called upon to mediate as a local agent of government between aggrieved local nationalist parties and the IC, not merely as traditional 'peacemakers' (even with the peace enforcement/ peacemaking conceptual distinction elided), but as a de facto instrument of government rule, as increasingly in Kosovo, and the logic of the current operation in FYROM shows.⁶ It is a threat to the original aims of the OSCE, and it is unclear what could replace the organization if it is further discredited by pro-globalisation electoral pressures within the international community.

ENDNOTES

¹ See OSCE statement of 9 July. At that stage, after the first round of voting, the Socialist party had 42% of the vote, the Democratic Party-dominated Union for Victory had 37.1%.

² See 'Albania - from Anarchy to a Balkan Identity' by Miranda Vickers & James Pettifer, second edition, C Hurst & Co, London, 2000, p266 ff.

³ In late 2000, the opinion polls all showed an overwhelming lead for the Socialists, with a 30% majority or more over the right wing opposition. This had begun to narrow over the six months prior to the election, and there was a noticeable improvement in the position of the Right after the violence had begun in FYROM in spring 2001. The polls were very accurate in their predictions of the share of the vote on the first ballot. These poll ratings, with their apparent link between the Albanians in FYROM and the Right in Tirana, may have played a major role in the concerns of the international community and the decision to engineer a 'decisive' victory for the Socialists at the election.

⁴ See OSCE statement of 23 July 2001, 'Albanian elections: in remaining zones, third round highlights problems'.

⁵ Conversation between Arben Xhaferi and James Pettifer, May 2000.

⁶ It is noticeable that in recent months in Kosovo, KFOR has involved itself more and more with activities that were originally regarded as lying within the orbit of the UN civilian authorities or the UNMIK police. The raids by the Black Watch regiment on the Grand Hotel in Pristina in late August 2001 are an example. At the same time, the Ground Security Zone has been fully opened to the Yugoslav army (17 August 2001), a decision which is likely to further increase insecurity among the Albanian majority population.

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