



Rebels with captured tank in Argyrocastro, 9 March 1997

The Greek Minority in the Albanian Rising

James Pettifer

This year has seen the collapse of the 'pyramid' investment schemes in Albania, followed by an armed uprising in the south of the country against the government of Dr Sali Berisha. The high-interest banks collapsed in January and February, and the widespread street unrest that had been endemic in southern Albanian cities in those months grew into a full-scale armed uprising in early March. It was originally focused in the Adriatic coastal town of Vlora, where two of the largest pyramid schemes, Gjafferi and Populli, had been based. In the first week in March, the Berisha government declared a state of emergency and attempted to regain control of Vlora and other rebellious areas by the use of the security police (SHIK) — all heavily-armed northerners loyal to Berisha — and the army. Opposition leaders in Tirana were harassed and often arrested. Draconian restrictions on the Press were introduced, which were condemned by Western leaders such as the then British Foreign Secretary, Malcolm Rifkind, and hurriedly withdrawn. The people nevertheless believed that the Berisha regime was proposing to introduce a dictatorship.

The clumsy and inefficient military operations precipitated precisely the situation the government was trying to avoid. The army did not prove capable — or willing — to take effective public order measures at street level, but their intervention allowed local community leaders within the rebellious areas to argue that armed resistance to a prospective dictatorship was necessary, and in March there were widespread seizures of weapons from local magazines and military stores. Berisha-appointed officials generally fled and local 'national salvation committees' rapidly became the only effective 'government' in many places.

The Greek Minority in the south played a full part in these events, although their position is often complex and contradictory. The Minority has undergone many changes since the end of Communism, and is no longer the generally socially and economically homogenous group of oppressed

Orthodox villagers that it was in 1990. Emigration of young people to work in Greece has been very high, which has resulted in severe depopulation in many villages, particularly on the coast between Himara and Saranda. Some political exiles have returned from abroad and repossessed property expropriated under Communism. Other ethnic Greeks have become prominent in the new commercial culture post-1991. Ethnic Greeks have generally done well out of the land privatisation process. But elderly people left behind in rural areas have a very uncertain existence, dependent on remittances from abroad.

I was in Argyrocastro on March 8-9 when the town changed sides and went over to the rebellion, and many of the difficulties of the position of the Minority can be seen in the events of that day. Roughly speaking, ethnic Greeks in and around the town fell into four groups with very disparate political attitudes. The first group was the Greek shopkeepers, nearly all ex-emigrés, who had done well out of the privatisation process and who were generally Berisha supporters. Without exception these people had fled, or were preparing to do so. Their shops had already been smashed and looted. The second group, much the largest in the town itself, were mostly unemployed young men, who were enthusiastic supporters of the rebellion. The third group, small in numbers but politically very significant, were ex-army and ex-police officers who had been dismissed by the Berisha government on political grounds. They provided a core of older leaders. The last group were the villagers in the Droppul valley, who were usually elderly and were trying to keep their heads down and avoid involvement in the anarchy.

The town fell to the rebellion when the government sent Special Forces troops in helicopters to try to secure the local magazine, the largest in southern Albania. At about 12 o'clock the river valley below Argyrocastro was suddenly full of armed men. But they were prevented from reaching the town by fire from local SHIK and troops who had mutinied and seized weapons from the town police HQ. I subsequently discovered that in the mayhem the SHIK men had driven their boss away, and the local police chief had actually led an attack on his own police station to secure weapons.

The pro-Berisha troops retreated to their helicopters and returned to their base north of Tepelena. This town had been in rebel hands for two days. Within a few minutes, the main army magazine had been opened, and soon literally thousands of weapons of every description were being distributed to the population. Tanks were seized and moved to guard the river bridges. Ethnic Greeks were prominent in all this alongside Albanians, and I understand from my fellow-*Times* correspondent, Antony Loyd, who had spent time in Saranda the previous day, that this was the case there also.

Elections in June brought a substantial Socialist victory and the ultimate fall of Berisha, but there was no immediate handing in of weapons or restoration of order. The new government is a Socialist-dominated coalition but with important ministries, such as the Interior Ministry, held by a centrist, the National Director of Archaeology Dr Neritan Çeka.

It is obviously impossible to foresee the future of the Minority after these tragic but not unexpected events, but although everyone is by definition endangered in the anarchy, the ethnic Greeks are not, per se, particularly singled out for popular anger, apart from the 'outsiders' who returned from exile abroad to repossess property. It is difficult to see this group having any role in the reconstruction process, but the basis of Minority life and culture should survive elsewhere, if in very testing circumstances.

James Pettifer is Visiting Professor at the Institute of Balkan Studies, University of Thessaloniki, and co-author with Miranda Vickers of Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity (C. Hurst, London 1997)