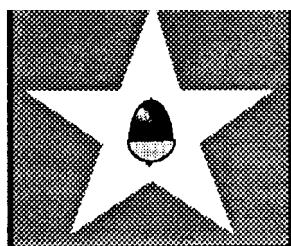


Conflict Studies Research Centre

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**Albanian Elections 2003 -
Progress, Shortcomings &
The Greek Factor**

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Albanian Elections 2003 – Progress, Shortcomings & The Greek Factor

James Pettifer

The local elections held on 12 October 2003 attracted some international attention for the usual reasons, insofar as there is always international community interest in the possibility of a return to power of Dr Sali Berisha and the Democratic Party, and in the nature of elections as an assessment of the strength of the development of democratic institutions. The period of spring-summer 2003 had also seen a renewal of the power struggle at the top of the governing Socialist Party between longtime leader Fatos Nano and his younger challenger Ilir Meta, and with national parliament elections due in 2004, the local elections this year were widely, and correctly, seen as a test of Nano's strength. In the international community Nano is often regarded as the inheritor of the political traditions of the ex-communists from the old Albanian Party of Labour, while Meta is seen as more pro-European and less tied to the political structures and modus operandi inherited from the past. It is in fact questionable how far this is really an accurate perspective: the periods of time in the immediate past when Meta has won the power contest have not significantly affected political culture.

The Poll

Voting took place in a new framework, after negotiations between the two main political parties and the organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions (OSCE) during 2002-2003. Various shortcomings had been identified in the 2001 elections, particularly concerning voter complaints and appeals procedures, and procedures for runoffs and reruns of seats where the results were disputed. In 2001 this had led to several interminable reruns, lasting weeks after the elections.

About half the electorate voted, a normal figure for local elections throughout Europe; and polls were held for councils and mayors in 65 municipalities, 308 communes and the 11 municipal sub-units of the capital, Tirana. A total of 2,703,608 voters were included in the voting list, but a significant proportion of the voters are living and/or working abroad in Greece, Italy, Switzerland and elsewhere, and therefore the turnout figure is actually higher than might be expected. About 1,750 candidates took part in the mayoral votes, and over 4,000 people stood as councillors. On polling day voting took place calmly in the vast majority of locations, with what the OSCE termed 'a reduction in the heated rhetoric which marred past

campaigns and with only a few isolated reports of attempted intimidation through pressure on employment'.¹

Some poll observers have commented that this is an over-sanguine view. Disputes over the polling register were common in Tirana and Durrës where the Democratic Party has refused to date to accept the results. The main reason for this is that both these major towns were held by the Socialist Party, but both have been subject to significant population growth through internal migration in the last five years, mostly from northern Albania. New suburbs have grown up, made up of northern incomers who are in general much more likely to be Democratic Party voters. Many had not applied to be removed from the electoral register in their place of origin or included in the Durrës or Tirana register, so they were effectively disenfranchised unless they returned to vote in their home locations.

Serious violence only occurred in one place, the southern Adriatic coastal town of Himara, where there was a murder. After a hotly disputed poll, which was claimed in victory by the candidate of the ethnic Greek minority party there, mass demonstrations of the ethnic Greeks took place, and then a march by Albanian party supporters from Vlora, with slogans such as 'Himara is Albanian, Greeks out!'²

The count was affected in some places by power outages, leading to disputes between candidates and the local electoral commissions.

Political Trends

In general the poll showed some increase in support for the opposition Democratic Party (DP), so that if the election were regarded as an opinion poll guide for the 2004 national elections, the two parties would be running neck and neck, both with the support of about a third of the electorate. The DP did not have universal good fortune, though, and lost control of the city of Elbasan, despite the economic and social progress there in the last four years, and a widely respected mayor and efficient local administration. Tirana was won by incumbent mayor Edi Rama, who was running as an independent but since the election has joined the Socialist Party (SP). Mr Rama has presided over a dramatic improvement in the urban landscape and the clearance of major slums and illegal commercial developments that had grown up in the Berisha period, and is seen as a favourite among the international community for future national leadership. He is a southerner, from Gjirokastra, from a mixed Catholic-Muslim family, and is contesting the

¹ See Republic of Albania, OSCE International Election Observation Mission, *Summary of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions*, Tirana, 14 October 2003.

² There is a long history of difficult inter-ethnic relations in Himara, dating back to Ottoman times. See James Pettifer, *Blue Guide to Albania and Kosovo*, A & C Black, London, 2001, p477ff. Emigration to Greece since 1990 has steadily reduced the size of the ethnic Greek minority in Himara, and large numbers of these expatriate voters were bussed into Himara for the election day.

party chairmanship at the coming December SP party congress. He had been courted by the DP and his decision to join the SP is a blow to pro-Berisha forces in the capital.

In general the election confirms the picture of a Socialist Party with a long established hegemony at local level, and a rank and file following that over most of the country is still primarily loyal to Fatos Nano, particularly in the provinces. Although Meta has strong support in his home region of Shkrapar, south of Elbasan, and among the aspirant middle class that is growing in Tirana and the coastal cities, international advocates of a Meta leadership often overlook the residual poverty and hardship of life outside the capital, and the basic loyalty of SP members to Nano and his circle. There is also a widespread view in the SP rank and file that many of the Members of Parliament who support Meta are de facto controlled by foreign interests and that whatever his faults, which are widely recognised, Nano is in some respects a more 'patriotic' candidate. Nano has shown considerable political skill in deflecting attacks by the international community in the last year, and has espoused noticeably more nationalistic policies on some issues, with a distancing of influence from Athens (in the 1997-2000 period the dominant influence on the government), and much closer links with Albanian leaders outside the country. He has received the key accolade of respectability with the United States, with visits from top Bush administration staff to Tirana.

The Democratic Party still labours under the handicap that the anarchy and chaos of the 1997 pyramid banking crisis is still fresh in many people's minds and the fact that those well acquainted with the DP generally see it as still a personal vehicle for Dr Berisha, rather than a modern and functional political party. Although his willingness to engage in dialogue with the SP and to return to parliament has improved his standing with the international community, he has yet to recover significant backing in the US, even in the generally Right-inclined Albanian diaspora there, and it is still not clear whether a) a transition to a DP government would be peaceful, especially in a closely contested election and b) whether a DP government would be a functional government.

The SP has always enjoyed the advantage of the loyalty of the great majority of the educated elite left over from the communist period and the substantial patronage that this brings. The risk that a DP government might not work, or that a difficult transition could bring violence seems to most US policymakers a risk that is not worth taking, providing Albania continues to go at least roughly in the direction that the United States wants. This election is satisfactory from the US point of view, in that its conduct has been seen by the OSCE as an improvement over 2001, and violence or disorder between the main Albanian parties has further diminished. An additional strength of the SP in the post-2001 climate is that, for all its faults, it is definitely a non-Islamic party, either secular or mildly Orthodox in orientation, whereas the Christian Right in the US has noted with displeasure that over 3,000 mosques were reconstructed in Albania in the DP period between 1992 and 1997. The fact that these were often

reconstructions of existing buildings, embodying a very moderate national religious tradition of only about 60% of the people, which had been vandalised or destroyed in the Hoxha period is often not well understood in these circles, who also see the current growth of Albanian links with the Islamic conference as a negative factor for the DP.

The Greek Factor & The Election

The fact that the only significant violence took place in a southern Greek 'minority' area is not coincidental, and is significant. Greek-Albanian relations have been steadily deteriorating over a long period, from 1997-1998, when the SP-government was more or less under effective Greek control, to the watershed of the Kosovo war when Greek links with Serbia and Russia and the failure of Greece to take any refugees whatsoever produced a reorientation of relations. The days of the Greek-brokered talks between Milosevic and Nano on Crete in November 1997 belong to a different political world. The United States is now the dominant influence on Albanian national security, defence and foreign policy, and the Nano government has adapted to this.

At the same time, there have been important, if little known developments within the 700,000 strong Albanian diaspora in Greece. The days of the diaspora as docile, poverty stricken migrants have passed, with a significant proportion becoming effectively resident and joining a property-owning middle class. There are now over 1,000 Albanian owned companies in Greece, and on some islands and localities Albanians and people of ethnic Albanian descent make up 30% or more of the summer population. Clubs and societies and a trades union for Albanian workers have been started. There have been so far unproven allegations that the paramilitary 'Albanian National Army' has members in Greece. The Greek government does not recognise the existence of ethnic minorities in the country, and diverges from normal European practice over several issues, minority education and language rights in particular. The Cham issue of property compensation for World War II displaced persons has reopened, with debates in the European parliament and in the US Congress on the subject.³

The situation of the Greek 'minority' in Albania is the reverse, with continual depopulation and problems over the maintenance of the identity of some traditional Greek villages near the border in the south. A programme of advancement of individual rights was agreed between US Greek diaspora activist Nicholas Gage and the US Embassy in Tirana earlier in 2003, and the 'minority' is no longer a geographical entity, but at local level there are still many difficulties in inter-ethnic relations.⁴ The Greek hard Right and

³ See CSRC paper by Miranda Vickers, 'The Cham Issue - Albanian National & Property Claims in Greece', G109, April 2002.

⁴ The 'Greek Minority' area where ethnic Greeks live in south west Albania is centred on the town on Gjirokastra and the adjacent Adriatic coastal region. Since communism ended, the minority have been reduced in numbers here, as a

many people within the Orthodox world in Greece still harbour territorial designs on the 'minority' areas around Saranda, the coast north to Vlora, and Gjirokastra.⁵

Indicators

The election has shown some further progress in institution building in Albania, with a much better atmosphere and electoral law compared to the 2001 poll, but with no real resolution of the deeper post-1997 issues between the two main parties. There is scope for further improvement in the updating and accuracy of the electoral register in dealing with internal migration problems, and in prompt announcement of the results. The election has indicated the growing sensitivity of the relationship with Greece, and the need to open negotiations over ending the technical state of war that still exists between the two countries; to improve human rights for minorities in both countries and to open talks to bring a negotiated settlement to the Cham issue.⁶

proportion of the population, and have moved, in some cases, to other places in the country, particularly the capital, Tirana. See CSRC paper by James Pettifer, 'The Greek Minority in Albania in the Aftermath of Communism', G97, July 2001. It is often said that the 'minority' was a communist concept of Enver Hoxha, but this is not the case. It was pioneered under King Zog in the 1930s, and many of the problems caused by the notion of 'Minority Areas' first appeared then.

⁵ The 'Northern Epirus' organisations in Greece are generally run from the city of Ioannina. Albanian organisations are usually centred on Athens, but most Cham activists are either in Turkey, the USA, or Albania itself.

⁶ Greek Foreign Minister Papandreou has threatened to veto Albanian-EU talks if the rights of the minority in Himara are not respected. ADN, Tirana, 18 November 2003.

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