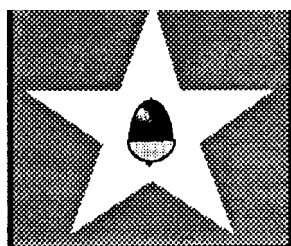


Conflict Studies Research Centre

James Pettifer

**Ali Ahmeti &
The New Albanian Political Party
in FYROM**

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Ali Ahmeti & The New Albanian Political Party in FYROM

James Pettifer

This paper outlines the formation of a new ethnic Albanian party in FYROM and warns that the national election due in September 2002 may be fraught with difficulties.

In the chaos in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) during 2001 caused by the conflict between the ethnic Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) and the FYROM army and security forces, there was little change in the ethnic Albanian political leadership. The dominant Democratic Party of Albanians (DPSH) led by Arben Xhaferi and Menduh Thaci¹ held a preponderance in the Albanian community, continuing a position which had been gained since the mid-1990s. Xhaferi was a key figure in the Ochrid negotiations, and it was mainly Xhaferi's influence on the Albanian side that enabled the negotiations to come to a successful conclusion, in late August 2001. The ethnic Albanians abandoned several long standing policy objectives to secure the agreement, and accepted a disarmament and demobilisation programme that significantly altered the internal military balance within FYROM. Xhaferi has been in poor health for some time, and there has been regular speculation about how long he will be able to carry on as party leader. His co-leader, Menduh Thaci, is not as highly regarded by the international community, and has been subject to various corruption allegation, so far unsubstantiated.

Although other leaders took part in the negotiations, and new small parties emerged in 2001, such as that of Kastriot Haxirexha, the ex-NLA leadership remained purely military until spring 2002, when the main leader, Ali Ahmeti, left his mountain headquarters at Sipkovica, near Tetovo, and announced that he was going to form his own political party. The founding conference was held in Tetovo on June 5th, and was attended by several hundred delegates from Skopje and all regions of western FYROM.² It has been announced that the new party headquarters will be based in Skopje. The policy of the new party envisages the retention of the current FYROM state, rejects cantonisation, and foresees a transformation of the FYROM economy through private investment and foreign assistance. The 30% plus ethnic Albanian minority will enjoy full language rights, and a new Albanian language Tetovo University will be established.

In essence these policies are either part of the conventional wisdom of modern eastern Europe, or long standing ethnic Albanian cultural demands

which only involve bringing FYROM into line with EU and US human rights standards. The leadership group of the new party comprised Mr Ahmeti himself; General Gezim Ostremi, the ex-NLA field commander from the 2001 conflict; Teuta Arifi, a prominent female intellectual; Rizvan Sulijami, from a Tetovo family; Aziz Polloshani, from the southern Struga region; Nazim Beqiri and Haxhi Lika. The main point of interest is the geographical spread in the leadership base, rather than the exclusively Tetovo-focus of the DPSH, or the Skopje-centric orientation of the old ex-nomenclatura leaders. Ali Ahmeti himself is from Kichevo.

In terms of the politics of the last ten years, the new party represents the third major stage in the development of leadership of the Albanians. The first, from independence in September 1991 to 1993, more or less exclusively involved Skopje-based ex-nomenclatura people with a Yugoslavist background; the second, from November 1993 to February 2001, saw the growth of constitutionalist but 'radical in atmosphere' nationalism around the Xhaferi-Thaci axis in Tetovo, and now the third has begun, in the aftermath of the wartime period.³ In terms of personal and family antecedents, some elements of the new leadership group generally belong to the political Right. Ahmeti himself was a political protégé of the Ahmet Haxhiu group in his youth in the anti-Belgrade underground resistance.⁴ In this respect also, they complete the transition period evolution of the Albanian leadership, from the ex-communists of the early period, to the liberal-left humanism of Xhaferi and his associates. Many of them have very close links with Kosova, and unlike the Xhaferi party, some also have useful relationships with Tirana political leaders.

The founding of the new party has been generally welcomed in the international community, who have seen it as a further step in the integration in the political elite of the ex-NLA leadership. It has not been welcomed by most Slav-Macedonians, who have never accepted the general legitimacy of the NLA or most of the Ochrid Agreement. The geographic spread of the new leadership is philosophically unwelcome to the Slavs, many of whom have always sought to regard ethnic Albanian radicalism as a product of the special, allegedly 'Islamic' political culture of Tetovo, and have sought to ghettoise it there. When news of the founding conference was announced, FYROM Defence Minister Boskovski apparently met a number of Serbian 'volunteers' who were coming to join Slav paramilitary groups in FYROM. These people were later turned back at the border by NATO forces, but it was an inauspicious sign for the future.

In Tetovo itself, ex-NLA Commanders Leka (Daut Rexhepi) and Valoni (Sheval Etemi) have taken over the two main leadership posts in the DPSH in Tetovo, as President and Secretary.⁵ Thus ex-NLA personalities not only have their own party, but have assumed the leadership of the DPSH in its most important Tetovo stronghold. Xhaferi himself has been reported as saying that he would like to work jointly with the new party.⁶ It is not clear what deputy leader Menduh Thaci's view of this would be. Whatever the details, it is clear that as in Kosova, the military leaders from within the KLA/NLA tradition have assumed a central role in the political evolution of

their nations after the 1999 war. In some respects, they are in a stronger political position than in Kosova, as FYROM is an independent state with its own traditions, and does not have the powers of government by administrative edict, absence of legal control over KFOR, media machine and financial patronage that the United Nations/NATO has in Kosova. This has played an important role in keeping Rugova's Kosova Democratic League (LDK) alive, although the political evolution of the LDK has been considerable in the recent period, with Ibrahim Rugova making clear at The Hague that he now accepted the positive role that the KLA had played in the liberation war.⁷

The Current Political Situation & The September Election

The main forthcoming event in FYROM is the national election of 15 September, although in some quarters doubts remain about how far it will be possible for the election to be organised efficiently in the time available before that date. It is not clear how many international monitors will be present, or which parts of FYROM they will be deployed in, given that the Speaker of the FYROM Parliament, Stoyan Andov, has said that he does not envisage them being allowed throughout the country. There are still significant difficulties for the non-state media in FYROM, and some ethnic Albanian journalists have gone into exile or left their profession as a result of their experiences in the 2001 conflict. The election register is still strongly biased towards the Slav-Macedonians, with the 15 year residence requirement imposed by the 1994 census causing a marked disenfranchisement of the ethnic Albanians. Constituency organisation was gerrymandered against them in the same year, and this and other reforms, and a new census, as agreed at Ochrid, will not have taken place. At the moment security is very problematic in what the government call the 'crisis regions' of northwest FYROM, and there are regular shootings and acts of violence, and it may be difficult for polling to take place at all in some places. As these are also the areas where Ahmeti's party is likely to do best, there is likely to be pressure on the leadership to boycott the Skopje parliament in the event of widespread difficulties. It is also unclear whether many Slav deputies will be prepared to work with (or even sit with) members of Ahmeti's party in the legislature.

There is thus a significant, perhaps major risk of electoral manipulation and difficulties with the result. If previous FYROM elections are a guide, the immediate aftermath period may be particularly difficult. It often takes several weeks for the results to be published, and they are frequently controversial. In this period, social and political tension invariably rises. There are extremists on the Slav side, principally those around Defence Minister Boskovski, who might welcome another confrontation with the Albanians in the light of the Simitis-Georgievski agreement for Greek aid to the FYROM army, and the degree of military demobilisation of the ethnic Albanians embodied in NATO's disarmament operation in October-November 2001 after the signature of the Ochrid Agreement. On the Albanian side, there are bound to be allegations of electoral fraud and poll rigging, which

may well have some foundation. Many ethnic Albanians may not bother to vote at all given the failure of the international community to insist on practical implementation of the Ochrid reforms before a national election was held. The lack of a new census with an end to the 15-year residence requirement is a key issue here. If violence develops after the poll, it may be difficult to control, and the OSCE may be put in the position of trying to defend what will have been a highly unsatisfactory election that will destroy what remains of the spirit of inter-ethnic collaboration of the Ochrid period.

So far, the OSCE appears to be accepting the main parameters laid down by the Skopje government, and it seems unlikely there will be much pressure from the OSCE for a rigorous examination of the democratic procedures.⁸ This policy also carries a serious risk of destroying the legitimacy of the election. There is also the risk that holding a bad election will destroy confidence in Ochrid as an effective instrument of human rights reform, given the fact that a fair census and electoral probity were supposed to be a centrepiece of the reform programme. It is always possible for the international community to impose an Albanian component in the Skopje government leadership, and no doubt this will also be possible after the September election, but as the 2001 conflict showed, such short termism can have serious long term results. If the leaders do not have a reasonable degree of democratic legitimacy, then there will be significant numbers of Albanians who may wish to return to paramilitary activity.

On the Slav side, the main interest in the election will be whether the VMRO-DPMNE party of Lljupko Georgievski can be returned to government, after a period of unpopularity following the Ochrid Agreement. The preferred result for the international community would probably be a continuation of the status quo, or a deal between the Social Democratic party and a Xhaferi led Albanian coalition, and other minority parties. In present circumstances, it may require a substantial degree of electoral manipulation to achieve this, and the balance the international community will have to strike is between a suitably 'massaged' result dependent on the current gerrymandered system and lack of a fair census, and the risk of precipitating a return to paramilitary activity and violence. It is also not clear whether, given the substantial influence the ex-NLA tradition will have in the ethnic Albanian areas, Arben Xhaferi will be able to act as a free agent in post-electoral party negotiations of the type the International Community might envisage.

ENDNOTES

¹ For general background, see James Pettifer, ed, 'The New Macedonian Question', Palgrave, London and New York, 2000; Hugh Poulton, 'Who are the Macedonians', C Hurst and Co, London, 1997. For a Tirana Albanian view of developments see Aldo Bumci, 'Macedonia and the Albanians: The Confines of Ethnic Politics', Albanian Institute of International Studies, Tirana, 2001. A good view of the leadership issue from a Tetovo perspective is in Beqir Berisha's 'Fundinje Adventure Politike', Tetovo, 1998. A pro-Slav-Macedonian view of the main issues is in Duncan Perry, 'Macedonia: Small Potatoes or a Big Deal', The International Spectator, Rome, April-June 2001.

² See FAKTI newspaper, Skopje, 5 June 2002.

³ See James Pettifer, 'FYROM - Shades of Night', on www.csrc.ac.uk, 2001.

⁴ See Ibish Neziri, 'Ahmet Haxhiu nje jete te tere ne levizjen ilegale', Prishtina, 2001.

⁵ OSCE Daily News, Prishtina, 10 June 2002.

⁶ Overtures from Xhaferi towards Ahmeti are not new: as long ago as September 2001 Xhaferi stated in an interview in Skopje that he would like Ahmeti to join his party and become its President.

⁷ See Epoka e Re and other Prishtina newspapers, reports of Rugova's Hague IWCT testimony, 7 May 2002.

⁸ The Skopje OSCE office stated on June 29 that it had hoped to deploy 750 monitors throughout FYROM.

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**The Conflict Studies Research
Centre**

Royal Military Academy Sandhurst
Camberley
Surrey
GU15 4PQ
England

Telephone : (44) 1276 412346
Or 412375

Fax : (44) 1276 686880

E-mail: csrc@defenceacademy.mod.uk
<http://www.csrc.ac.uk>

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