

POLLING TOWARDS A ONE-PARTY STATE

James Pettifer

The election in Albania has produced a de facto one-party state with few checks on a powerful president. Have President Berisha's Western backers mismanaged this part of the Balkan jigsaw?

THE ELECTION ON 26 MAY WAS A DECISIVE setback for the democratic process in Albania, particularly as the 1991 and 1992 elections, held under communism, were given generally good reports by international monitors. It has punctured the public relations-nurtured myth that Albania had developed into a potential European democracy and that Sali Berisha was a democratic leader.

It is clear there has been a high level of manipulation of information and wishful thinking about Albania in some official circles. This is likely to be the most immediate victim of the election. It is very difficult to see the relatively favourable view of Albania within NATO, the European Union and the Council of Europe being maintained.

The regime of Dr Berisha shows every sign of developing into a classic contemporary Balkan state, with an over-powerful president, little or no effective democratic opposition in parliament, and a numerous, privileged and highly politicised police and security apparatus.

BERISHA BACKERS

Much of the responsibility for this must rest on the uncritical backing given to Dr Berisha by the United States, Britain and Germany. Greece fell into line with European Union (EU) dictates and offered Dr Berisha visa

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agreements in the key final week of the campaign.

EU countries have largely failed to protest about increasing serious human rights violations in Albania in the last year, although the United States has shown more sensitivity about some issues, particularly those concerning the judiciary.¹

Greece, under Prime Minister Kostas Simitis, has abandoned the principled policies of past years in favour of what may well be chimeras. These countries, and the other EU members, now have a heavy responsibility to prevent the extinction of what remains of Albanian parliamentary democracy, and to protect the human rights of the opposition. The Simitis government in Athens faces particular pressures, as the positions taken up were a volte-face from all previous national policies on Albania.

The first round of voting was marred by widespread irregularities. During the campaign the Berisha government broke the electoral laws in a number of respects – failing to make available state funding allocated to opposition parties until late in the campaign, widespread police intimidation of opposition activists, problems with voting procedures, and multiple voting by Democratic Party activists.

The electronic media was wholly dominated by intense propaganda for President Berisha. All opposition parties withdrew from the fray on the night of polling, and a de facto one-party state has resulted.

The day after the declaration of the result was marred by police attacks on an opposition demonstration in central Tirana and disturbances elsewhere in Albania. The European Union called for a number of seats to be contested.

International election monitors have varied in their estimation of the degree of manipulation, and the report by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) had been expected to be a political fudge between pro- and anti-Berisha groups within the OSCE delegations, and EU governments. Some monitors

do not seem to have known much about Balkan political realities, while other 'independent' observers had various private political agendas.

However, in the event the large presence of the international press made 'management' of the OSCE report along the lines of the seriously distorted election report on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) in autumn 1994 very difficult for EU governments. The second round of voting for the small proportional list went smoothly, but with nearly all opposition parties maintaining the boycott.

DECLINING SUPPORT

Internally, the president and the government have been running into problems for some time. His Democratic Party (DP), founded from the mass dissident anti-communist movements in 1990, has suffered a continual decline in cohesion and support, with the resignation of nearly all the founding-fathers of the party.

It has not proved possible to develop a constitution that has popular consent. The Berisha proposals for a highly centralised and authoritarian constitution were rejected in a national referendum in November 1994. As a result, presidential decree is an important feature of government, leading to many administrative problems as well as a lack of democratic content in decision-making.

There have been constant attacks on individual journalists, and the television remains state-controlled and is heavily biased in favour of the government party.

Corruption in public life has grown rapidly, with virtually no investment from large international corporations, but some success in attracting funds for smaller enterprises from Greece and Italy. Disputes over the ownership of land often make investment very difficult.

There has been constant government pressure on the leadership of the opposition, involving serious and sustained human rights violation for some activists.

The legal system is not independent of

the government.² The leader of the main opposition Socialist party, Fatos Nano, has been imprisoned for alleged corruption and was unable to take part in the election. Laws were forced through parliament disqualifying thousands of people from the poll if they had any connection with the communist regime.

At a popular level, this is seen as unjust and hypocritical by opposition supporters, as many in the current government, including President Berisha, were themselves active communists for many years.

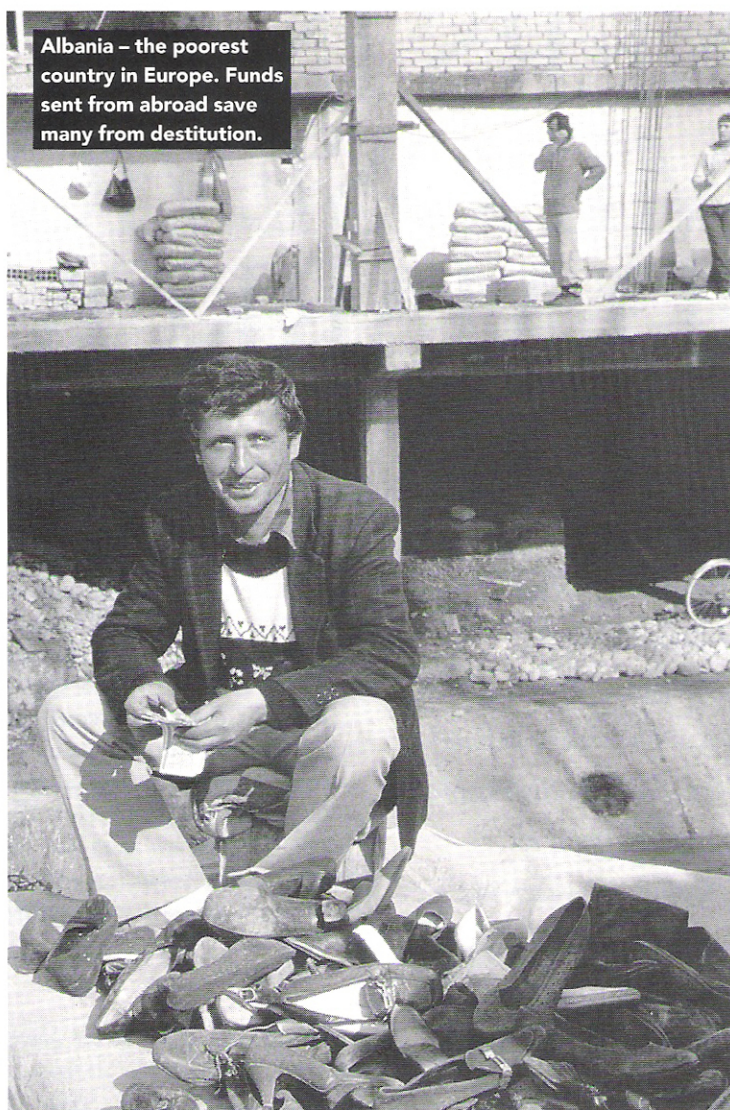
Many leaders of the centrist Democratic Alliance and independent figures in the judiciary have found it preferable to live abroad. In the absence of an independent and functioning legal system, there has been a marked revival of the blood feud, with independent experts estimating that as many as 60,000 people are currently involved in over 2,000 revenge cycles.³

APPEALING TO FREE-MARKETEERS

Since its election in 1992, the DP government has followed a policy of rapid transition to a free market economy and privatisation. This followed the 'Years of Anarchy' between 1990 and 1992, which saw social turmoil and mass emigration in the aftermath of the collapse of the one-party state.⁴

The Berisha government has claimed credit for a successful programme of land privatisation, the restoration of public order, and a stable currency, with the lek holding its value against the dollar for most of the last three years.

The growth rates, by comparison with most of post-communist eastern Europe, are very high, although it should be borne in mind that Tirana government statistics take as their base the 1990-92 period, when production had almost totally collapsed. With the large international aid flows and special status with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, almost any government would find it hard not to produce impressive growth statistics.



The genuine achievements in the financial sector have not been matched in the practical economy, although the Berisha government has been at great pains to claim internationally that they have been.

In reality, there has been considerable improvement since 1990 in agricultural commodities such as vegetables, but cereal production remains a problem. Apart from construction, much of the industrial economy remains in a state of collapse; only parts of the chrome mining sector have been able to survive. Unemployment is very high indeed, and funds remitted from abroad are the only thing keeping many families from destitution.

A FACTOR FOR STABILITY?

In normal circumstances, the serious human rights problems and very patchy economic and political record of the Berisha government would lead to a degree of international indifference to its fate. But in current Balkan conditions, most Western leaders have seen

the preservation of the Berisha regime as a priority. Berisha's most active backers are the United States and Germany, which both wish to strengthen Albania to weaken Serbia. Austria has been an important surrogate for German policy.

Throughout the conflicts in former Yugoslavia, the Berisha government has been seen as a factor for 'stability'. The United States succeeded in becoming the dominant power over Albanian foreign policy and was able to reduce the President's original nationalist commitment to the people of Kosovo.⁵

Albania has also appealed to free-market fundamentalists in the IMF and the World Bank, as one of the last governments in eastern Europe where their ideas are actively espoused.

But foreign policy is the key issue for the international community. For most of the Bosnian wartime period, from 1992 to 1995, the views of the Albanian government under Berisha were successfully 'managed' and thus effectively marginalised so that,

Photograph by V Riviere/Sygma

for instance, in Lord Owen's lengthy and important memoir of the peace negotiations, *Balkan Odyssey*, President Berisha only rates a single sentence.⁶

The basic impetus of foreign support for the Berisha government has been to emasculate growing Albanian nationalism and weaken and control the Albanian struggle in Kosovo and FYROM, and to keep Albania out of any active role in the Balkan imbroglio. It remains to be seen whether this will also be a casualty of the May events in Tirana. Growing social and economic instability in Albania itself seems very likely.

1 Human rights were a central issue during Dr Berisha's visit to Washington in October 1995. See *Albanian Daily News*, Tirana, 4 October 1995.

2 The sacking and exile of Judge Zef Brozi is the best example of the pressure on the judiciary. See Albanian press during autumn 1995.

3 See work by Antonia Young and Bradford University South-East Europe Unit during 1995-96.

4 See Miranda Vickers and James Pettifer, *Albania: From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity* (London, C. Hurst & Co., 1996, forthcoming).

5 Much of the 'control' of Tirana leaders over events is entirely mythical, as the recent emergence of armed Albanian groups in Kosovo shows.

6 David Owen, *Balkan Odyssey* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1995), p. 187.