

## LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS IN ALBANIA ANY CHANGE IN PROSPECT?

*By Claude MONIQUET  
President of ESISC*

### By way of introduction

Albania is now officially integrated within NATO. Just a few weeks ago it put forward its candidacy for the European Union. These are as high profile as events can be for a small, 'forgotten' country in the Balkans which experienced near-total autarchy for decades during the Communist era. It is also a bit of revenge for the outgoing Prime Minister, Sali Berisha (Democratic Party), who was chased from the Presidency twelve years ago following the scandal of financial pyramids which unleashed a civil war that caused more than 2000 deaths and led to heavy emigration abroad.

Less than 1 week ahead of the legislative elections which will see a renewal of the 140 deputies in Parliament, the political class in power continues to claim and to promise change. It is, moreover, in the name of 'change' that the two principal parties began in December 2008 a profound reworking of the electoral code aimed at institutionalization of a bipolar political system of the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party (SP).

While this reform aimed at putting an end to the fragmentation of the Albanian political scene, it nonetheless remains true that it reinforces the unchallengeable, and possibly autocratic, rule of the two principal leaders of DP and SP. Thus, many political personalities from the past 20 years were evicted from the electoral lists.

### "Change" – the leitmotiv of the electoral campaign

Following the example of the other principal political formation, Sali Berisha (DP) continues to promise Albanians "change." Indeed, a quick glance at the names adopted by two of the coalitions of parties in contention leaves no doubt as to their objectives of "change." The DP coalition is called the *Alliance of change*, while the coalition grouped around Edi Rama, president of the SP and mayor of Tirana, calls itself the *Union for change*. Moreover, analysis of the programmes of the DP and the SP confirms this desire.

(DP Slogan: Albania is Changing – SP slogan New politics of change)

Ever since the fall of the Communist regime, one has to say that Albanian society and the state have undergone profound mutations. For all that, does the Albanian population still expect change? If so, what kinds? An expert on Albanian Affairs explains: *The Albanian*

*political class is permanently calling for change while the population has been disoriented by the gross transformations of society and is looking for stability.*<sup>1</sup>

The leader of the DP puts up front his results as head of the government he has led since 2005 and promises a bit more further... change!: *'These next four years will be ones of development in our country(...)*.<sup>2</sup> Thus, while the country is facing grave economic difficulties, the outgoing Prime Minister foresees a vast programme of reforms: the creation of employment in the public sector, an increase in pensions and salaries, etc. One can legitimately wonder about the feasibility of these objectives now that the government is already in debt and that it intends to take out new loans. The over-all debt of the country has reached 6 billion Euros, i.e., 56% of GDP and is not about to go down given the economic crisis, which has hindered somewhat more the country's ability to repay the foreign debt. Meanwhile, Sali Berisha promises, among other things, to increase the budget for public works. Unfortunately, raising the budgets remains hard to reconcile with the economic objectives to be achieved for the sake of joining the EU, all the more so that Albania keeps on ignoring the advice of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which urges it to reduce its public investments. Finally, one will note, as Ervin Qafmolla emphasises, that: *'(...) independent experts are predicting a decline in direct foreign investments (DFI), all of which is very bad news for Albania as it is powering ahead with development and has need of foreign capital.*<sup>3</sup> The forecasts of the IMF<sup>4</sup> predict negative growth in 2009 (- 0,4%). This news, one suspects, should not logically prompt the government to increase public investments to boost the labour market.

Though Sali Berisha returned to power to: *'restore the rule of law and combat corruption which is the blight of Albanian society,*'<sup>5</sup> the catastrophe of Gërdec<sup>6</sup> and the involvement of the Prime Minister's entourage in this dismal affair of arms trafficking reminds us that "not everything has changed." One will also note that during its tenure the Berisha government has repeatedly attacked the media and independent institutions.

In 2008, a World Bank report moved Albania several places further down the world ranking of countries facilitating investments compared with 2007. Remarking the heavy bureaucracy and taxes, the report severely criticised Albania for moving too slowly on the needed reforms. Definitely what we see is a less than lukewarm assessment for Sali Berisha because, even if the World Bank reports that 10,000 rose out of poverty during these past several years, nearly 12.4% of the population still lives on less than \$2.00 per day.

As for Edi Rama (SP) – "prevented" from running since he did not resign his post as mayor – he also claims to speak for change and his programme relies on achievements which have transformed the city of Tirana. His coalition, the **Unity for Change**, brings together mainly the Social Democratic Party, the Party of Social Democracy (PSD) and the Group 99 (G99).

During the launch of the electoral campaign, the socialist leader said at a meeting on the campus of the University of Tirana before a crowd of supporters: *'I ask that you vote to participate in the change for our country, change which goes well beyond a vote for one party of the left or the right. I call upon you to vote for new politics, for better schools, more jobs, more infrastructure and a better quality of life for all, by turning a page of our*

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<sup>1</sup> La libre Belgique, "Albania and Europe", 25 May 2009.

<sup>2</sup> BIRN, 29 May 2009 in Le Courier des Balkans, 2 June 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Ervin Qafmolla, "Legislative elections in Albania: the economy at the heart of the campaign of Sali Berisha", Mapo, 9 June 2009 in Le Courier des Balkans.

<sup>4</sup> Srećko Latal, "The economic crisis in the Balkans: the IMF sounds the alarm" Belgrade Insight, 1 May 2009 in Le Courier des Balkans, 14 May 2009.

<sup>5</sup> TemAonline, 22 March 2008.

<sup>6</sup> On 15 March 2008, a gigantic explosion occurred in the village of Gërdec, 14 kilometers from Tirana. A munitions warehouse of the Albanian Army exploded causing the deaths of more than 20 persons and wounding nearly 300. Moreover, the explosion affected nearly 2,300 buildings and 4,000 persons were evacuated outside the area affected.

*history.*<sup>7</sup> Some of the objectives are similar to the DP, requiring huge investments which, as we have just explained, would seem hard to reconcile with the economic situation in Albania.

During the entire campaign, the two major parties (DP and SP) lashed out at one another. They put forward reforms and changes which seem utopian given the present economic situation and the financial capabilities to come. As for the small parties, they succeeded in drawing the attention of the electorate and in concentrating on its needs and expectations.

Though Sali Berisha has not been spared accusations of corruption for his family, neither is Edi Rama outside such charges. The polemic around building permits granted by the mayor of Tirana strongly tarnished the Socialist Party. We should also mention the incomprehension aroused by the 'irrational' decision of the strong man of the SP not to head up the list of his party while he strives to win the post of Prime Minister.

Alongside these two grand coalitions, we also note:

***The Socialist Alliance for Integration*** combining the LSI (socialist movement for integration of Ilir Meta, former Prime Minister, 1999-2002), together with the PSV<sup>9</sup> of Petro Koci, the Green Party, the movement for human rights and liberties, the 'Rights for Emigrants' party and the 'New Tolerance' party, representing the Roma and color minorities.

***The Pole of Liberties (Poli i Lirisë)*** Led by a former PM Aleksander Meksi, and by the Christian Democratic Party brings together the Conservative Party, the Movement for National Development, the party for the democratic union, the 'liberty road' party and the party for democratic reforms.

## **Reform of the electoral code, bipolarisation and its consequences for the vote**

Ever since the end of the Communist regime in 1992, the elections in Albania have never stopped being tainted with irregularities, corruption and fraud. The latter evidently constitute obstacles to Tirana's integration in Europe. Since 1997, Brussels has been continually helping the authorities, particularly by exercising over them 'a very strict supervision'<sup>8</sup> to ensure the reconstruction of the Albanian state. In 2006, Albania and the European Union signed an accord of stabilisation and of association (ASA) which came into force on 1 April, a first stage in the process undertaken by the authorities in Tirana. Apart from its economic aspects, the accord commits the EU to assist Albania in reinforcing its democracy and its move to political, economic and institutional stabilisation.

At the same time, to remedy this disastrous image of corruption, a special fund of 65 million leks (500,000 Euros) was recently allocated to the political parties represented in Parliament, with the two main parties (DP and SP) being the principal beneficiaries<sup>9</sup>.

Although as we have just mentioned, the reform of the electoral code is partly the result of OSCE/ODIHR pressure on Albania to avoid the trafficking of votes and damaged representation, it nonetheless remains true that it now will extinguish almost all other parties, with only LSI and, possibly LZHK surviving.<sup>10</sup> This means bipolarity will set in at the expense of the small political formations which in the end is not favourable to democratic debate and is a heavy blow to genuine representation of the electorate.

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<sup>7</sup> BIRN, 29 May 2009 in *Le Courier des Balkans*.

<sup>8</sup> La libre Belgique, "Albania and Europe", 25 May 2009.

<sup>9</sup> BalkanInsight.com, "Albanian Funds Parties Ahead of Election", Tirana, 25 May 2009

<sup>10</sup> On this subject, see the note by Claude Moniquet, President of the ESISC, 'Albania: When a Reform of the Electoral Code Weakens Democracy,' ESISC, 15 October 2008, in <http://www.esisc.org/documents/pdf/en/albania-reform-of-the-electoral-code-414.pdf>

The reform of the electoral code and of the central electoral commission has given rise to a blatant lack of trust of the small parties regarding the administration of the elections. Many of them expect that there will be irregularities on Election Day, especially as concerns the counting of votes and the disenfranchising of people from voting as result of failure of government to issue the ID cards for the citizens.

The publication of the voting lists has aroused a lot of interest both in public opinion and among the political observers. In fact, the DP and the SP decided to adopt the same strategy as regards preparation of the list of candidates. Thus, the DP chose to present a large number of intellectuals and to 'forget' a good number of political personalities. As for the Socialist Party, the same logic holds, as a recent article from the International Institute Ifimes<sup>11</sup> explains: *'The Socialist Party is seeking to convince the public of its determination to support progressive intellectualism, but the reality is that it intends of promote persons having business relations and a doubtful past, all of which underlines the manipulation of the composition of the candidate lists.'*

One will note the removal of personalities such as the historic leader of the Left, M. Fatos Nano and of Messrs Besnik Mustafa (former Minister of Foreign Affairs), Zogaj, Karapicit and Biberaj, all important members of the Democratic Party.

### **The role of the media during the electoral campaign**

Albania has a great many media outlets. Alongside Albanian radio and television (RTSH), the National Council of Radio and Television granted 3 licenses to commercial TV chains which enjoy the right to broadcast over the entire country. Albania also has nearly 70 local television chains and 50 cable networks.

Although most of the media are considered to be 'moderate,' they are not independent. In fact, as a recent report of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe<sup>12</sup> indicates: *'The most important audiovisual media and the written press media are generally considered to be aligned with one or another of the two main political parties ; the media in general are considered by many to be pluralist, but not independent of any political influence.'* During the campaign, certain media tried to sell the idea according to which the political system has now become totally bipolar, insisting on the DP and the SP at the expense of the "small parties,' This is a tactic which would seem to have failed. In fact, the success of satirical political broadcasts – following the example of the talking heads in France – such as *Portakalli* (on the network Top Channel) enjoy real success in Albania by promoting the *'gap between the maturity of the population and the political class, which lives in a closed vessel,'* as a well-informed observer of Albanian politics explained to us.

The OSCE report also emphasises that radio RTSH – whose reform has not been completed – has the widest coverage on the territory and remains financially dependent on the state: *'The RTSH is perceived by many interlocutors as serving the government and the party in power.'* This statement was confirmed by our source when he explained to us that: *'national TV changes its political orientation every time that the government changes.'*

### **By way of conclusion**

**It is a sign of how uncertainty still hangs over the democratic nature of the forthcoming elections that many European ambassadors and the US ambassador recently met with the two strong men of Tirana, Sali Berisha and Edi Rama to share with them their concern over the transparency of the**

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<sup>11</sup> IFIMES, International Institute for Middle East and Balkan Studies, *'Socialist Alliance for Integration – The Key to Composing the New Government,'* 8 June 2009 in <http://www.ifimes.org/default.cfm?Jezik=En&Kat=10&ID=467>

<sup>12</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Election Observation Mission, Republic of Albania, Parliamentary Elections 2009, INTERIM REPORT NO.1, 8-21 May 2009 in [http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2009/05/37843\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2009/05/37843_en.pdf)

balloting. As for the OSCE, which will closely oversee the elections with its 439 observers, through the voice of its representative in Tirana, Ambassador Robert Bosch, it concludes that: *'(...) the political class as well as the entire Albanian administration will work to ensure that these legislative elections are the most democratic ever organised in the country so that Albania may truly then make a great step forward.'*<sup>13</sup>

Although the two main parties favoured by the mode of the election are neck and neck several weeks ahead of the elections, it would appear from a reading of the latest polls that the DP could find itself unable to form a government coalition with the Pole of Liberties. In fact, it would not gather enough votes. SP and DP might decide to go to power together. Nevertheless that scenario seems to be unlikely so far due to the strong opposition that occurred between the 2 parties during the campaign.

Now the alternative could emerge from a coalition consisting of the SP of Edi Rama and LSI of former Prime Minister Ilir Meta. If that were the case, this would likely be the end of the Berisha era and, ironically, the coming of change for Albania. No matter which of these scenarios will play out after the elections, one thing looks certain, that LSI has a key role to play on who forms the new government.

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<sup>13</sup> OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, Election Observation Mission, Republic of Albania, op.cit.