

ELECTORAL HOLD-UP IN ALBANIA

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The two dominant parties on the Albanian electoral scene, the Democratic Party of Prime Minister Sali Berisha and the Socialist Party are organising a veritable *electoral hold-up*. This is occurring against a background of total indifference on the part of a Europe which once again shows it has a short memory and risks paying the price ...

Two weeks ago, we published on this site an analysis of the **reforms of the electoral code** which have been underway for several months and which, in our view, weaken democracy. Let us briefly summarize them again: what is at issue is the plan to introduce proportional regional elections (with variation of the threshold permitting the election of a deputy between one electoral district and another), to 'de-personalize' the vote (one will now choose a party instead of a candidate), to oblige the parties to line up at least 140 candidates (70 in the context of a coalition) and to place the 'Central Electoral Commission' within the responsibility of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Some of these reforms would be questionable even in the 'old' democracies. In a country which has recently become democratic, which has experienced phases of great violence, which is prey to vote-catching and corruption and which is undergoing difficult economic and social conditions, they are purely and simply catastrophic. In fact, as we wrote, what we have here is nothing less than the determination of the two dominant parties to eliminate all competition by eliminating the small parties which do not pay allegiance to them and so to share power between themselves in the years to come.

Alas, **the succession of events since then has proven us right. Several days ago, the DP and the SP tailored a Central Electoral Commission to measure, taking for themselves the majority of the seats.** Thus, in a commission which has seven members, two will be designated by the DP and two by the SP, while two will be nominated by the small parties but must be approved by the full assembly (which means that these seats will be reserved for the satellites of the dominant parties) and the seventh will be ... chosen by consensus between the DP and the SP.

One of the first consequences of this decision will be that the LSI (Socialist Movement for Integration), a pro-European Social Democratic group which is today the main force of the independent opposition, will be purely and simply excluded from the Commission. This is not unimportant when one knows in addition that the LSI is led by **Ilir Meta**, who was the Prime Minister from October 1999 to February 2002, then Minister of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister and that all observers agree that his tenure in office was a time when the country made the greatest advances.

Two remarks have to be made. First, **two parties which together do not represent the majority of the voters are trying to monopolize local political life.** Next, and what is more serious, these two parties have been involved, whether from near or from far, in all the corruption scandals that have tarnished the political life of this small country, in particular during the past five years. Some of these scandals have had worldwide repercussions, such as a dismal affair of trafficking in Chinese arms for Afghanistan, which was exposed in March after an 'accident' that cost the lives of many dozens of persons and wounded nearly 300 others.

One should also remember that the principal inspirer and owner of the reform, the 'democrat' and present Prime Minister **Sali Berisha** was a former official in Communist Albania and **was President of the Republic in March 1997 when the 'pyramid scandal' broke – a gigantic affair of corruption (already then!) which ruined the population and pushed the country towards chaos and civil war.** Approximately **two thousand Albanians were killed** in several weeks of clashes. The United States, Italy and Germany had to stage the evacuation of foreign citizens and the situation of Albania was compromised for a long time.

Today Europe seems to want to allow the same man to play God once again. What will be the price to pay this time?