

# Albania's 2009 Elections and the Challenges of Democratic Transition

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On June 28, Albania will hold its seventh, multi-party parliamentary elections since the demise of the Communist regime almost twenty years ago. In view of Albania's profound political and economic transformation and the dramatic changes in regional dynamics favoring the Albanians, such as Albania's membership in NATO, Tirana's submission of an application for European Union membership and the growing consolidation of Kosova's independence, the holding of orderly elections should seemingly be an easy and normal task. However, Albania's record of flawed elections and the often divisive and confrontational nature of Albanian politics have led some observers to question Albania's ability to conduct credible elections, in full conformity with international standards.

The upcoming elections are an important test of Albania's democratic maturity. As a member of NATO and a potential candidate for membership in the European Union, Albania will and must be held to significantly higher standards than in the past. Failure to conduct elections in line with international standards will have a profound impact on Albania's political stability, roll back the significant political and economic gains achieved in recent years, erode international support for Albania and the Albanians in Kosova and Macedonia, and delay indefinitely Albania's membership in the European Union.

The United States, a staunch supporter of Albania's democratization process and the driving force behind Albania's accession to NATO, has underscored the critical importance that the upcoming elections will have for Albania's progress and integration into the European Union. The issue was raised by senior officials of President Obama's administration during Prime Minister Sali Berisha's meeting in February with Vice President Joe Biden and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The European Union, too, has on several occasions urged Albania's political forces to cooperate and ensure that the upcoming elections are free and fair.

Government and opposition leaders seem to recognize that there is a lot at stake and have pledged to conduct clean elections. Following Albania's accession to NATO in April 2009, Prime Minister Sali Berisha put his own prestige on the line by publicly stating that he will "guarantee" that the elections will be free and fair. And Albania's main opposition leaders, the chairman of the Socialist Party, Edi Rama, and the chairman of the Socialist Movement for Integration, Ilir Meta, have said that they will do their part to ensure a transparent electoral process.

## **Background**

Since the end of Communism, Albanian politics have been dominated by the country's two main political forces – the center-right Democratic Party and the Socialist Party, the successor to the Albanian Communist Party. The two have alternated power and have largely governed in a partisan and non-transparent fashion. They have tended to view elections in terms of a zero-sum game, often disregarding democratic norms, manipulating electoral procedures, intimidating the judiciary and the media, and contesting the unfavorable results.

The Democrats, led by Sali Berisha, came to power in 1992 and instituted radical economic and political reforms. But by the mid-1990s, President Berisha, who had been considered as one of the most progressive democratic leaders in the Balkans, turned increasingly autocratic, imposing restrictions on basic political actions, introducing a restrictive media law, and allowing pyramid schemes to flourish. The collapse of pyramid firms in 1997 sparked an armed revolt, leading to early elections and the Socialist Party's return to power. During the next eight years, Albania experienced significant economic growth, adopted a new constitution, and enacted important legal reforms. However, Socialist rule was characterized by political instability, infighting within the Socialist Party, lack of cooperation between the government and the opposition, and a dramatic rise in corruption and organized crime activities. The ruling party was consumed with the personal strife between its leader Fatos Nano and Ilir Meta, who was forced to resign as Prime Minister under pressure from Nano. In September 2004, Meta left the Socialist Party and formed his own party, the Socialist Movement for Integration. The split and the rising disenchantment with Socialist rule resulted in the Socialist Party losing the parliamentary elections in 2005. Nano, who had led the Socialist Party since 1991, resigned. He was replaced by the popular mayor of Tirana, Edi Rama.

The 2005 elections represented a remarkable comeback for Berisha, who was held primarily responsible for Albania's implosion in 1997. Drawing lessons from the time he was president, Berisha had formed a broad pre-election coalition, welcomed back into the party former prominent officials that had left the Democratic Party in the 1990s, and invited some 40 young experts from the civil society to draft the party electoral platform. Many of these young experts, members of a Policy Orientation Committee, were subsequently appointed to important cabinet posts.

Berisha's government laid out an aggressive agenda to combat the economic crisis, improve the business environment, fight corruption and organized crime, and speed up Albania's integration into NATO and the European Union. The government made significant progress in its efforts to create a stable political environment with functional democratic institutions. Albania experienced strong economic growth, averaging an annual real GDP growth of 7 percent. Poverty and unemployment were reduced, and pensions and wages in the public sector increased. Between 2005 and 2008, poverty declined by one-third, from 18.5 percent of the population to 12.4 percent. Albania also made great efforts to improve its business climate. The World Bank in 2009 ranked Albania 86 out of 191 countries; in 2008, Albania was ranked 135th. The global economic crisis, however, is having a significant impact on Albania. The crisis has led to a decline in exports and has limited Albania's access to external financing. In addition,

remittances from Albanian migrants abroad are likely to decline significantly. Albania's real GDP growth in 2009 has been revised down and is now forecast at less than 2.0 percent.

The government also launched a huge public infrastructure program, the most important being the highway project linking Albania's port city of Durres with Kosova. This is Albania's largest and most ambitious project since the demise of Communism. It will boost the economic development of northern Albania and significantly increase cooperation with Kosova. While the building of the road is deeply emotional for many Albanians on both sides of the border and Berisha has used the road to boost his party's electoral chances, it is not clear what impact it will have on election day. The Socialists have criticized the high cost of the highway, estimated at more than \$1.4 billion, and have accused government officials of corruption and abuse of power. Foreign Minister Lulzim Basha, who was Minister of Transportation and Public Works when the project was launched, was charged with abuse of power and breaking tender rules. However, the Supreme Court dismissed the charges on a series of technicalities.

Berisha came to power in 2005 with the promise to rule "by clean hands," insisting that rooting out corruption was "fundamental" to Albania's democratization. Throughout his four years as Prime Minister, he has maintained a strong anti-corruption stance. Transparency International ranked Albania 85<sup>th</sup> in its 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index out of 180 countries. There is no question that Berisha's campaign advanced Albania's aspirations for Euro-Atlantic integration. But despite undeniable gains, corruption remains pervasive. The government has also come under domestic and international criticism for failing to respect the independence of the judiciary and interfering with the investigations of a blast at an army ammunition dump in Gerdec in March 2009, which killed 26 persons. The tragedy occurred less than two months before Albania's membership in NATO. Defense Minister and leader of the Republican Party, Fatmir Mediu, was forced to resign. The incident devolved into partisan finger pointing, with the Socialists accusing the government with arms smuggling and corruption.

Perhaps the government's greatest achievement was Albania's membership in NATO. Berisha termed Albania's achievement of this strategic objective as the most important event since independence. Membership in the European Union is Albania's other major foreign policy objective. In 2006, Albania signed a stabilization and association agreement with the EU, and in April 2009, submitted the application for full membership. However, Albania's EU integration prospects will depend to a great degree on the conduct of the June 28 elections and the extent to which the new government will be able to accelerate the pace of fundamental political, legal, and economic reforms. In its November 2008 report, the European Commission praised Albania for the progress it had made but stressed that further efforts had to be undertaken to fight corruption and strengthen the judicial system.

### **The June 2009 Elections**

The elections will be held under a new law adopted in December 2008, which changes the electoral system from mixed to a regional proportional system. It gives party leaders almost unchallenged authority to select candidates. The code divides the country into 12 constituencies, corresponding to Albania's 12 administrative regions and establishes a 3 percent threshold for

political parties and a 5 percent for pre-election coalitions. Smaller parties across the political spectrum, led by the Socialist Movement for Integration, fiercely objected to the new electoral code, arguing that the regional proportional system would favor the two largest parties. In order to increase their electoral prospects, smaller parties have been forced to join one of the four coalitions.

The elections will be contested by more than 30 political parties, grouped into four coalitions.

**Alliance for Change** – Headed by the Democratic Party, the coalition includes the Republican Party, the Democratic Alliance Party, the Liberal Democratic Union, the Environmental Party, and about a dozen of other small parties. The Democratic Party's electoral platform highlights the government's achievements: strong economic growth, the strengthening of the rule of law, the struggle against corruption and organized crime, and integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. In his campaign speeches, Berisha is asking Albanians to vote for the Democratic Party not only because of what his government has achieved in the last four years, but because of the promise for greater accomplishments in a second mandate.

**Union for Change** – The Socialists have created a coalition with their traditional allies: the Social Democratic Party, led by former speaker of the Albanian parliament Skender Gjinushi, the Social Democracy Party, led by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Paskal Milo, and the Human Rights Union Party, which until a month ago had been part of Berisha's coalition government. In addition, the Union for Change includes the new party, G99, which emerged from the civic movement *Mjaft* (Enough).

Edi Rama inherited a deeply divided party, plagued by fierce infighting, and badly tainted by its leaders' corruption, and ineptitude in tackling the country's problems. The elections are a test of credibility for Rama and the Socialist Party's inevitable leader – if the Socialists lose the election, Rama will have to resign, as the party statute stipulates. He has faced stiff resistance from the old guard, which has made it difficult for him to renovate the top party leadership and appoint his own people in senior positions. The list of candidates, however, includes many new faces. This reflects Rama's desire to finally break the backbone of the old guard within the Socialist Party.

Rama has emerged as the party's only star campaigner, crisscrossing Albania, and portraying Berisha as an old guard politician and his government as having failed in every aspect. Although as mayor of Tirana he has faced allegations of corruption, Rama has promised to be a prime minister of a new kind, pledging a clean break from the country's past corruptive policies. The Socialist Party is offering itself as a clear alternative to the Democratic Party, pledging to improve the economic situation, boost agricultural production, reduce poverty, and reform the health and educational systems. The Socialist Party has questioned the record of Democratic rule and has pledged a more accountable and effective government.

**The Socialist Alliance for Integration** coalition groups the Socialist Movement for Integration and six fringe leftist parties. In 2005, the Socialist Movement for Integration won 8 percent of the vote, and Meta now hopes to emerge as the kingmaker. For the last two years, Meta has

been as critical of Rama as of Berisha, strongly denouncing the Socialist leader for cooperating with the Democrats to adopt constitutional changes and a new election law, which, according to Meta is likely to eliminate or marginalize smaller parties and thus undermine Albania's democracy. Since the beginning of the election campaign, Meta has muted his criticism of the Rama, focusing his attacks on Berisha, thus leaving open the option of entering into a coalition government with the Socialists after the election. The Socialist Movement for Integration has pledge to work to reduce unemployment and poverty, develop agriculture, and overhaul the country's health system.

Finally, the center-right **Freedom Pole** coalition is made up of six fringe right-wing parties, including the Movement for National Development, and the Christian Democratic Party. Members of the coalition accuse Berisha of having betrayed the interests of right-wing voters. The Freedom Pole promises to advocate the rights of former property owners and the former politically persecuted. Alexander Meksi, a founding member of the Democratic Party who served as Prime Minister between 1992 and 1997, leads the coalition. The Pole of Freedom, which includes many right-wing politicians that left the Democratic Party because they were disenchanted with Berisha's policies, is targeting the traditional Democratic electorate – the former political prisoners and property owners whose assets were confiscated by the Communist regime.

The Democratic and Socialist parties claim to reflect competing strains of public opinion and to hold contrasting views of Albania's future. However, with the passage of time, their platforms have become largely indistinguishable and their approach to most issues is pragmatic and non-ideological. There has been a narrowing of the ideological gap and there are no deep philosophical differences between them. In recent years, the relationship between the two parties has evolved in significant ways, leading to unprecedented cooperation in pushing forward constitutional, electoral, and judicial reforms. In 2008, they agreed on a package of constitutional amendments providing for significant changes in the electoral system and the way the president of the country is elected.

Although there are no reliable polls, most observers believe the elections will be very close. While it is difficult to speculate on the choices the electorate will make, Albanian voters are likely to shun ideology in favor of pragmatism. The key issues are the economy, the fight against corruption and organized crime, and which of the two major political parties is more likely to strengthen democratic institutions and the rule of law, speed up the pace of reforms and best guide Albania toward eventual membership in the European Union. Tirana currently enjoys very good relations with all its immediate neighbors, and foreign policy is not a salient issue. Albania's strong support for Kosova's independence does not seem to have adversely affected its relationship with other Balkan countries, with the exception of Serbia. There is a consensus between the Albania's most significant political forces on the country's main foreign policy orientation: all favor maintaining Albania's robust strategic relationship with the United States, moving ahead with the EU integration process, strengthening regional cooperation, and expanding economic and cultural ties with Kosova and Albanians in Macedonia and Montenegro.

## Conclusion

Albania's political forces are now engaged in a fierce political struggle. The electoral process is faced with some administrative shortcomings which need to be tackled before election day. The most contentious issue remains the issue of new voter identity cards. The government maintains that it is committed to ensure that all voters are provided with new identity cards, but time is running out. It would indeed be very unfortunate if thousands of voters miss the chance to cast their ballots because they lacked voter identity cards.

The political environment is less polarized than in the past. Militants across the political spectrum seem to have been marginalized. Thus far leading politicians have shown a remarkable civility in their campaigns, avoiding the fiery rhetoric that characterized past elections. The media is playing a critically important role with its comprehensive and largely objective coverage of the campaign. Leading television stations are sponsoring almost daily debates with candidates. As never before, Albanian voters have a real opportunity to familiarize themselves with the electoral platforms of individual coalitions and parties.

What seems unique about these elections is the significant rejuvenation of the list of candidates, especially in the case of the two major parties. Many prominent politicians have been excluded from the party list of candidates. In conformity with the new election law, at least 30 percent of the candidates are women. In addition, prominent, young civil society activists have been included in the lists of the major political parties. While this is a positive development, the migration of many civil society leaders into the establishment is robbing many non-governmental organizations of qualified leaders and reinforcing the notion that the civil society groups are not non-partisan.

The United States and the European Union have pursued a common strategy aimed at strengthening the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary, and helping Albanians fight effectively corruption and organized crime. One of the most important external factors that has influenced the behavior of Albanian leaders has been the desire for integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. This policy priority has forced discipline on both the government and the opposition and has served as an important stimulus for political and economic reforms.

The United States and the European Union have a stake in Albania holding free and fair elections and should hold firm in keeping Albanian politicians accountable. The United States, in particular, has great leverage and should not hesitate to use it to advance Albania's democratic reforms. The Albanians throughout the Balkans are on a resurgent path and this is due largely to U.S. support. It is highly unlikely that Kosovo would have been able to declare independence and Albania become a NATO member without Washington's backing. Albania's strategic partnership with the United States would undoubtedly suffer in the event of serious irregularities or attempts by the government or the opposition to manipulate the elections.

While the international community can provide valuable assistance and support, in the final analysis it is up to Albania's leading political forces to create a climate of trust within the body politic, end the political polarization that has impeded the country's progress, and develop a broader political and social consensus in deepening legal and judicial reforms. For Albania to

achieve these objectives, the country's major political forces and leaders will have to put aside their narrow interests and take responsibility for the tackling of the daunting challenges that Albania faces.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today.