

ALBANIA'S 2013 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS: POLITICAL PROSPECTS AND DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGES

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the U.S. Helsinki Commission! Thank you very much for the invitation to testify before your Commission. It is an honor for me to appear before you and to offer my personal views on Albania's political prospects and democratic challenges.

The June 2013 parliamentary elections will mark a milestone in Albania's political development. They will be a test of the country's democratic maturity and of its bid to join the European Union. How the Albanians conduct these elections will be important not only for the country's democratic progress and future direction but also for regional political and economic stability.

Albania's record of contested elections and post-election disputes have set the tiny Balkan country apart from most other young, East European democracies, and tarnished the remarkable progress that Albania has made over the last two decades. Once again, the continuing confrontational nature of Albanian politics and some developments during the pre-election period, particularly the dispute over the composition of the Central Electoral Commission (CEC), have raised concerns regarding Albania's ability to hold free and fair elections in accordance with international standards.

The upcoming elections offer both challenges and opportunities for Albania. The inability to hold smooth elections is politically risky given Albania's polarization and domestic political context, characterized as it is with a dysfunctional relationship between the country's two main political actors, that have alternated political power since the demise of Communism – the ruling Democratic Party and the opposition Socialist Party. A negative assessment will hamper Albania's political stability, signal deterioration in democratic practices, and complicate Tirana's relationship with the United States and the European Union.

Conversely, credible elections, whose results are certified by domestic and international observers and accepted by the major players, will open new opportunities. Albania will be able to build on the significant political and economic progress it has achieved in recent years, strengthen its role as a constructive regional actor, and significantly improve its EU accession prospects.

* The views expressed in this testimony do not represent the views of the Voice of America.

Albania has the capacity to hold fully credible elections as is expected from a NATO member and an aspiring member of the European Union. Prime Minister Sali Berisha and opposition leader Edi Rama have committed themselves to do their utmost to ensure smooth elections. The United States and the European Union have strongly urged both sides to abide by democratic rules.

BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

Albania has made remarkable progress in terms of its economic and political development and efforts to join Euro-Atlantic institutions. Once the most reclusive and isolated state in Europe, Albania has become a responsible member of NATO. It has also emerged as a strong proponent of regional cooperation and reconciliation, and has developed a strategic partnership with the United States. Albania seems to have weathered the global economic crisis relatively well, although economic growth rates have declined. Real GDP growth in 2012 was 1.6 percent, down from 3.0 percent in 2011 and 3.5 percent in 2010. Prime Minister Berisha's government has made significant efforts in improving governance, reducing poverty and unemployment, improving the country's business climate, and launching a huge public infrastructure program.

But while prosperity has expanded, Albania remains stricken with poverty and high unemployment. The economic crisis in Greece and Italy, Albania's most important economic partners, has had a significant impact, leading to a drop in capital and remittance inflows. Although the government has taken measures to reduce the costs of doing business in Albania, attracting foreign investment has been a challenge because of investors' skepticism, perceived corruption, and ineffective bureaucracy.

The Albanian political landscape is fundamentally different today than it was twenty years ago. Yet, Albanian politics remain deadlocked and deeply dysfunctional. Some of the difficulties that Albania has encountered on its road to a consolidated democracy can be ascribed to the country's lack of a democratic culture, the Communist legacy, and economic underdevelopment. However, the current high level of politicization and fragmentation is the direct result of the two major parties refusing to engage in the give-and-take that is normally associated with a democratic order. Their overriding objective has been to gain and keep power. To this end, they have often engaged in questionable democratic practices.

The failure to embrace the rule of law, rampant corruption, and political stagnation has left the country bereft of durable, democratic and civic institutions. Public goods have largely been distributed on a preferential basis. Political elites have amassed huge personal wealth, while many ordinary Albanians lack access to basic goods and services. Basic institutions of governance and civil society groups are weak and under constant political pressure. Transfer of power from one political party to another has invariably been associated with efforts to subvert what in theory should be non-partisan functioning institutions, without much respect for fundamental democratic principles.

Power holders have also not shied away from institutional displacement and from attempts to rewrite the rules from one election to another. Electoral systems and electoral laws have undergone significant changes almost during every election cycle since the first multi-party elections in 1991. The 2009 election code, which was revised in 2012, changed the electoral system from mixed to a regional proportional system. It established a 3 percent threshold for political parties and a 5 percent threshold for pre-election coalitions.

In most cases, these changes were viewed as positive and a step in the right direction; after all, they were the result of an agreement between the country's main political forces and addressed recommendations by international organizations, particularly the OSCE/ODHIR. The CEC, which has the responsibility to conduct the elections, has been subject to constant and intense political interference. This has prevented it from developing into an empowered and truly non-partisan, administrative body. According to a formula agreed to in 2012, the ruling coalition proposes four of the CEC's seven members, and the opposition the other three. Following the decision of the junior partner, the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI), to leave the government in early April 2013, Democratic Party deputies, with the support of three Socialist deputies, voted to replace the member of the CEC that had been proposed by the SMI. This was followed by the resignation of the three members nominated by the opposition, rendering the CEC incapable of effectively administering the elections. Thus far the two sides have shown lack of political will to compromise and reconstitute the CEC. As this dispute demonstrates, the lack of a stable electoral infrastructure has undermined confidence in the election process and the administration of the elections.

POLITICAL GRIDLOCK

Since the 2009 elections, which the Democratic Party won by a narrow vote, Albania has experienced a serious crisis of institutionalization and relations between the government and the opposition have been marked by constant tensions. The OSCE/ODIHR report said the elections met most OSCE commitments, but added that they "did not fully realize Albania's potential to adhere to the highest standards for democratic elections." The Socialists contested the results, boycotted the parliament, and resorted to threats, ultimatums, and disruptive actions in pursuit of their demands. They shunned government calls for cooperation and stymied efforts to pass important legislation. The Democrats maintained an uncompromising attitude and refused to take any meaningful measures to reach out to the opposition.

Berisha's Democratic Party formed a coalition with Ilir Meta's Socialist Movement for Integration and launched an ambitious agenda of promoting economic development, reducing poverty, developing the infrastructure, creating jobs, and combatting corruption. Meta, a former senior Socialist Party leader who had served as prime minister, had split with the Socialists and formed the SMI in 2004. The improbable coalition between the two rivals-turned-allies worked relatively well. However, Meta's trial on corruption charges – based on a video, released by his former deputy Dritan Prifti, which purported to show Meta discussing bribe taking – eroded the coalition's popularity. His case became a source of acute embarrassment and cast an unflattering light not only on Meta and his party but also on Berisha's government. The Socialists made Meta the focus of their corruption criticism, and the violence that erupted in January 2011, in which four opposition supporters were killed in clashes with police forces, was sparked by popular

anger at Meta. The Socialists vehemently criticized Meta's acquittal in early 2012, insisting that it send the message that the courts were corrupt and top politicians immune from prosecution.

The dispute over the elections led to a long political impasse, diverted attention from pressing economic and social challenges, stalled progress on key reforms, and tarnished Albania's image and democratic credentials. While there is a wide consensus on the importance and potential benefits of Albania's integration into the European Union, Albanian leaders permitted short-term political considerations to trump the country's EU integration. In December 2012, the European Commission refused, for the third year in a row, to grant Albania candidate status.

Albania has received wide praise for its constructive regional role. The foreign policies of the two major parties have not diverged significantly. However, Kosova's declaration of independence in 2008 has led to an increased expression of pan-Albanian sentiments throughout the Balkans. The celebration of Albania's 100th anniversary of independence in November 2012 was associated with a sudden and surprising increase in nationalistic rhetoric. Berisha and other top Albanian leaders invoked the historical Albanian narrative, and raised the specter of the unification of all Albanians into one state. While the nationalistic rhetoric was seen by many as an attempt by the prime minister to neutralize the newly formed Red and Black Alliance, which advocates the unification of Albania and Kosova, Berisha's comments triggered a harsh international response. In the wake of international criticism that the nationalistic rhetoric threatened U.S. and EU security objectives of regional cooperation promotion, Berisha and other senior officials tempered their nationalist rhetoric.

Kosova's independence, Albania's membership in NATO and the increased empowerment of Albanians in Macedonia, Montenegro, and southern Serbia have given Albanians throughout the region a new sense of confidence and unprecedented security. But despite the revival of Albanian nationalism and patriotism, the idea of Albanian national unification has not become a dominant theme in Albania's public discourse nor is it a salient issue in these elections. Mainstream Albanian leaders in Tirana and Prishtina have developed a new narrative that conveys the opportunities of EU integration and emphasizes the benefits of regional cooperation.

THE JUNE 2013 ELECTIONS: A NEW OPPORTUNITY

The development of party politics in Albania is in many ways similar to that in other emerging democracies. Political parties are dominated by their leaders, who enjoy unchallenged authority to select candidates for elections. The established elite remains firmly entrenched and politics highly informal and personal. In general, political parties are not well defined, and they are composed of fractious coalitions that converge on some core issues but differ on others. There are also deep divisions between and among political parties. With the passage of time, it has become difficult to distinguish between party platforms since they tend to shun ideology in favor of pragmatism and are characterized by a lack of specifics. Despite some variation, most pretend to address the same issues: unemployment, combating corruption, improving services, attracting foreign investments, and implementing institutional reforms. The ideological gap

between the right and the left may not have disappeared, but it has definitely narrowed significantly. Decisions on coalitions are driven more by crude power considerations than by ideology or political programs. The best example of shifting political alliances and the coalescence of disparate political forces lacking a deep political alignment was the Democratic Party's coalition in 2009 with the SMI.

While Albania has a very vibrant and free media, most media outlets have aligned themselves with either the Democrats or the Socialists. Both sides have used the media to buttress popular perception of their own leadership, while questioning the ability of their foe to effectively lead the country. Instead of focusing on providing accurate and balanced reporting, most media have made a mockery of journalistic objectivity.

The various political forces have made increased use of social media to publicize their political programs and engage potential voters. Both Berisha and Rama are active social media users and have a significant following. Berisha regularly posts messages on Facebook, while Rama is an avid and engaging user of Twitter. They have shied away from a debate, relying on face to face interactions with voters, town hall meetings, and news conferences. Both have engaged in a campaign aimed at delegitimizing each other.

Despite the controversy surrounding the composition of the CEC, the election campaign thus far has been conducted in a much calmer and dynamic environment than in past elections. While there are dozens of political parties, the Democrats and the Socialists continue to dominate Albanian politics. Other, smaller parties have limited popular support, and most of them are led by politicians who split off from the Democratic or Socialist party over disagreements with their top leaderships. With the exception of two new forces that are contesting the elections on their own – former President Bamir Topi's New Democratic Spirit and the Red and Black Alliance – other parties have coalesced with the two major parties' coalitions. The Democratic Party-led Alliance for Employment, Wellbeing, and Integration, will have some 25 parties in its coalition, including the Republican Party, the Movement for National Development, and the Party for Justice Integration and Unity. In addition to the SMI, the Socialist-led Alliance for a European Albania groups together more than 35 parties, including the Social Democratic Party, the Union for Human Rights, and other parties spanning the country's political spectrum.

The Democratic Party The Democrats have been in power since 2005 and, under their leadership, Albania has made significant progress on many fronts. But after eight years in power, the ruling party appears vulnerable and concerned about an erosion of its popularity. Some blame the government for the post-2009 election gridlock and slow progress toward EU integration. In addition, growing economic hardships, inability to decisively address the corruption issue, and increased social discontent make the Democrats susceptible to a public backlash. Berisha hopes to meet the challenge by a resurgent Socialist opposition by touting his government's economic and social record, and by casting Rama as the main obstacle to Albania's integration.

The Socialist Party The Socialists view the 2013 elections as their best chance of returning to power and hope to benefit from a possible anti-incumbent backlash. The Socialists have made very ambitious election pledges, focusing their campaign on accusations of poor

governance, mismanagement, corruption, and the Democratic stronghold on institutional power. These elections are also a serious test of Edi Rama's leadership. Rama had pursued a self-defeating boycott strategy, engaging in an uncompromising battle with the Democrats. Many Socialists blamed Rama personally for the loss of the 2009 election and the 2011 mayoral elections in Tirana. He had made a serious miscalculation by declining Meta's calls to join forces in 2009 against the Democrats. The two leftist parties combined had won more votes than the Democratic Party. Most analysts believe that political bickering among the Socialists and Rama's failure to form a pre-election coalition with Meta secured Berisha's second term. Evidently recognizing that his confrontational approach had backfired and under increased pressure from party rank and file, Rama changed his strategy following his loss of the mayoral elections in 2011. He focused on counteracting the perception as a polarizing figure and improving his relations with the international community. He made concerted efforts to mend fences with internal opponents, and reached out to his former arch rival, Ilir Meta. By creating a coalition with Meta, Rama hopes to increase his chances of unseating the Democrats.

Meta's coalition with the Democrats was a marriage of convenience. Following his forced resignation as deputy prime minister and foreign minister as a result of corruption charges, his position was severely weakened. But following his acquittal, he gradually muted his criticism of Rama. While he had implied that he was open to an alliance with either the Democrats or the Socialists, he made it clear he would seek to exact the highest price. He views himself as the king-maker and if the Democrats win the largest number of votes, he could renew his coalition with Berisha.

New Political Parties In the last two years, two new forces have appeared on Albania's political scene: the Red and Black Alliance and the New Democratic Spirit. Both are contesting the election on their own. The Alliance was formed by Kreshnik Spahiu, who had served as deputy Chairman of the Council of Justice under President Topi. The Alliance's platform incorporates a strong dose of nationalist sloganeering and pledges to fight corruption, but lacks substance on other issues. Its nationalistic rhetoric and calls for the unification of Albania and Kosova have resonated with many Albanians disenchanted with established political parties. But Spahiu's credibility as a corruption fighter has been undermined by allegations that he had engaged in corruptive practices as deputy chairman of the Council of Justice. Many blame him and Topi for the highly politicized and corrupt justice system. The Alliance has been organized more as a street movement than as a real political party, mobilizing its supporters through protests and actions. Most media, particularly those close to the Socialists, were openly supportive of the Alliance but recently they have adopted a more skeptical stance. Initially, the Alliance displayed an ability to stage massive protests. However, in recent months much-hyped rallies failed to draw a significant turnout, a sign of its declining influence. The Alliance expressed willingness to join the Socialist-led coalition, but Rama rejected what the Socialists termed as the Alliance's excessive demands. The Alliance suffered a major blow in late April, when leading officials resigned en masse because of a lack of confidence in Spahiu's leadership.

Following the end of his tenure as president in July 2012, Bamir Topi, who had a falling out with Berisha, formed his own party, the New Democratic Spirit. The former president pledged to introduce a new "spirit" in Albanian politics, free from corruption and political nepotism. Splinter parties in Albania, however, have not had much success and the New

Democratic Spirit has not been able to expand its core leadership beyond its composition of disgruntled Democratic Party officials. While pledges for an uncompromising fight against corruption resonate widely, Topi has thus far been unable to mobilize a serious political following or recruit well-known and electable politicians. Nevertheless, the party leaders hope to attract right-wing voters, former political prisoners, and property owners who have yet to be compensated for assets confiscated by the Communist regime.

CONCLUSIONS

Albania is a country at a critical crossroads, torn between a potentially destabilizing political confrontation and the aspiration for national prosperity, democratic consolidation, and European integration. The country cannot afford another contested election that would likely trigger a destabilizing conflict and adversely impact Tirana's relations with Washington and Brussels. The elections offer Albanian political actors an opportunity to move beyond the usual zero-sum game approach to elections, demonstrate their commitment to democratic consolidation, and re-institutionalize democratic politics. The end of the political deadlock and brinkmanship, which have characterized the last four years, would unleash the great potential that the Albanians have, and pave the way for Albania's membership in the European Union.

Elections alone, however, even if they are held in full accordance with the highest international standards, are not a salve for Albania's democratization. The new government that will emerge from these elections will be faced with formidable challenges and can ill afford to be distracted by prolonged post-election disputes. Although conditions have not been conducive for the emergence of a new generation of leaders, Albania has a dynamic, highly educated, young generation that tends to think in a Western, democratic context and is poised to move into influential positions. Ordinary Albanians have shown a deep commitment to EU integration and view democracy as their preferred form of government. Albania has the capacity to reinvigorate democratic reforms, and restore the public's confidence in the political process. But to re-energize democracy and advance their nation's democratic aspirations, Albanian political elites must do much more to establish the rule of law, empower non-partisan institutions, reduce corruption, and dispel the widespread perception that politicians are enriching themselves at the expense of average citizens.

The role of the international community will remain critical. The United States and the European Union have been forthright in their support of democracy as well as in their criticism of democratic failings. While domestic political polarization and gridlock have led to "Albania fatigue," it is important that Washington and Brussels continue to engage Albania, using their significant leverage to foster democratic progress as well as to address democratic transgressions. A stable, democratic, and prosperous Albania, firmly anchored in the Euro-Atlantic community, is in the national interest of the United States.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear before you today.