
ALBANIA'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2001

I. OVERVIEW

The Socialist Party's decision on 21 August to nominate Ilir Meta for another term as Prime Minister closed out the longest election in Albania's turbulent post-communist history. Voting for the parliament was held, extraordinarily, in four rounds on 24 June 2001, and 8, 22 and 29 July due to accusations of electoral fraud in various forms. It was, nevertheless, peaceful and produced a decisive victory for the ruling Socialist Party (SP). The Socialists, who have held power since 1997, won 73 seats in the 140-member legislature, against 46 for the Union for Victory (UfV) coalition, led by the Democratic Party (DP). The remaining 21 seats were allocated among five small parties, each of which gained the necessary 2.5 per cent of votes, and two independent candidates who won direct mandates.¹ The results gave the Socialists a sufficient majority to form a new government and, crucially, with the aid of likely allies, to elect a new president in 2002 when the term of the incumbent, Rexhep Meidani, expires. Formation of that government, however, was delayed further weeks until the SP's General Steering Committee gave Meta an overwhelming victory in his bitter personal battle with the party chairman, Fatos Nano, who backed his own man for the prime minister's chair.

A decade after the collapse of communism, it can be argued that parliamentary democracy is finally gaining a tentative hold in Albania. The refusal (with some justification) of much of the

opposition to accept the Socialists' victory as fairly won, however, means that Albanian politics will continue to be rough, rude, and potentially explosive.

The Socialist-led government has overseen a return to stability and even a measure of economic growth since coming to power in 1997. These factors, combined with its responsible attitude towards the situations of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, the Presevo Valley of southern Serbia, and Macedonia, ensured victory. They have likewise gained a good measure of international support for Prime Minister Ilir Meta's administration. With tensions rising in neighbouring Macedonia, the relatively peaceful atmosphere in which the elections were conducted was important not only for Albania but also for the region. The Socialists' victory was welcomed by Albania's neighbours, who now feel confident that Tirana will continue to urge the Kosovo and Macedonian Albanians to use dialogue rather than violence to achieve their political aims. For the first time, an Albanian electoral campaign was fought more on issues than on personalities, but these were mainly domestic – the "national issue" played virtually no part, at least directly.

The calm atmosphere of this campaign, which was in marked contrast to previous elections, can be explained in part by the apathy of the population. As Albania's leading analyst put it succinctly: the public is tired and disappointed by politics, and indifference prevails over protest.² The turnout was low: 54 per cent for the first round, 48 per cent for the second. However, this may be deceptive as a barometer of political interest. Absentee voting is not permitted, and a considerable number of the eligible 2.5 million Albanians reside abroad. The

¹ Under the polling system, voters chose 100 members of parliament on a first-past-the-post basis. They then voted separately for one of the political parties, with the results of that second choice used to allocate the remaining 40 seats.

² Remzi Lani, *Parliamentary Elections in Albania: A Mission Possible?! 21 June 2001* (privately circulated commentary).

administrative problems that the drawn-out electoral process revealed have raised calls for changing to a purely proportional system.

Despite instances of irregularities and police intimidation, both the Central Election Commission and international monitors concluded that the first round could generally be regarded as free and fair. An OSCE press release stated that it represented clear progress towards meeting European standards.³ Ensuing rounds, the results of which were crucial for control of the parliament and the opportunity to determine next year's presidential election, however, proved far more problematic. Both major parties pulled out all the stops, legal and illegal. The Constitutional Court is now overwhelmed with complaints, and the public's confidence in the entire process has been seriously undermined.⁴

The DP gained a considerably higher percentage of votes cast than of seats won. The SP captured many of its seats by very small majorities, thus providing grounds for DP charges of ballot stuffing and police intimidation. As a result, the DP's leader, Sali Berisha, has announced that the UfV coalition will neither recognise the results nor participate in the next parliament unless voting is repeated in more than 30 constituencies. It is by no means certain, however, that all the parties in the UfV will join a parliamentary boycott. The Legality Movement has said it may reconsider, and the Republican Party has called a boycott immature and potentially damaging to the interests of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia, who require a stable and relatively unified Albanian government at a time of national crisis.

Both major parties, SP and DP, have emerged from the elections with serious internal divisions. Soul-searching has begun within the Democratic Party about its future and that of Berisha, its stubborn and unpredictable leader. The recently founded New Democratic Party, which came out of the elections as Albanian's third political force,

is likely to gain a significant number of disaffected DP members. Meanwhile, the Socialist Party is likely to experience further tremors from the ongoing power struggle between Meta and Nano, which could also seriously impair the credibility of the new government.⁵

³ The elections were monitored by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Council of Europe, the U.S. and the EU.

⁴ Even now, two months after the first round, little hard statistical data other than basic results have been released. Much more is needed before it will be possible to provide a full analysis of voting patterns.

⁵ Ilir Meta, 32, was first elected to the parliament from his mountainous home district of Skrapar, 120 miles south of Tirana, in 1992. He became Secretary for Foreign Relations in 1996, was appointed Deputy Prime Minister in Pandeli Majko's government in 1998, and moved into the prime minister's office the following year after Majko's resignation. Fatos Nano, 48, first became SP leader in 1991 when the Communist Party changed its program and statute. In 1992 Berisha had him imprisoned on trumped-up charges. Nano escaped from Tepelena jail during the 1997 uprising. He resigned as party leader in January 1999 to begin a campaign to remodel the Socialist Party along the lines of the German Social Democratic Party, which normally fills the posts of chancellor and party leader with different individuals. Nano was reelected as SP leader in October 1999, replacing Pandeli Majko, and moved quickly to reassert control over the party.

II. PRE-ELECTION POLITICS

The Socialist campaign brimmed with confidence. Huge posters featuring SP leader Nano's face loomed from prominent billboards – eerily reminiscent of the days of the one-party state and, to his opponents, visible reminders of the SP's communist lineage. The Socialists, not wanting to share posts with coalition partners, felt strong enough to contest the election on their own. They sought similarly to gain enough strength to elect the next president in 2002 without having to rely upon the smaller parties.⁶

The DP's professed optimism was artificial. In marked contrast to the Socialists, the Democratic Party did not feel strong enough to contest the election alone. In the spring, Berisha had resurfaced politically, reborn as a seemingly reasonable, softer spoken and relatively tolerant opposition leader. He called for a "New Beginning" for the Albanian right - a "union of all Albanians who believe in freedom and the motherland". As a result, several small right and centre-right parties agreed to fight the election alongside the DP under the UfV banner.

As Berisha was presenting his new softer style, Meta was adopting a harder stance. The prime minister is from the southern, left-wing district of Skrapar, which has strong partisan traditions from the Second World War. Albanians admire strength, and many appeared to be impressed by the harsh tones Meta adopted when he addressed crowds in the northern city of Shkoder, a traditional DP stronghold. Meta warned that "no one should dare to violate the vote of the Albanian citizens...No one should think of causing riots on 24 June, because we do not have a paper state, but a state that is ready to defend the people's vote, their institutions, and give their due to anyone who dares to endanger them".⁷

III. FLAWED BALLOTING

Albania uses a mixed first-past-the-post and proportional voting system that combines elements taken from various European countries. Each voter has, in effect, two ballots. He casts one for a specific candidate, regardless of party. This ballot determines the results of 100 of the 140 seats in the Parliament. The voter casts the second ballot for a party. This ballot determines the proportional allocation of the remaining 40 seats and whether a party has received sufficient votes – at least 2.5 per cent – to benefit from this proportional allocation. These relatively complex but European-standard rules were misused and abused, however, to produce the extraordinary spectacle of three run-offs or repeat votes, leading to a result that is still contested, or at least viewed sceptically, by substantial parts of the electorate and, particularly, its political class.

Prior to the initial, 24 June vote, the two main parties sought to increase their prospects by fielding many nominally independent candidates in the direct mandate constituencies.⁸ The Central Election Commission (CEC) blocked this scheme by barring 114 such candidates because they were in fact receiving support from either the Socialist Party or the Democratic Party.

The returns announced shortly after the 24 June vote appeared to indicate a landslide SP victory. The Socialists were provisionally awarded 74 seats, the DP, the dominant opposition party, only 22. That was far from the end of the story, however. The opposition complained immediately after the initial round on 24 June that the Central Electoral Commission was favouring their rivals. For their part, the Socialists accused the DP members of the commission of trying to delay, postpone and confuse the results as long as possible. On 25 June, with the situation still unclear, Prime Minister Meta proclaimed a SP victory. Another senior Socialist declared "We are convinced of the victory of the Socialists, which will lead Albania into Europe."⁹

⁶ The Albanian constitution provides that the parliament conducts up to three rounds of balloting for president. If no candidate obtains the requisite 60 per cent (84 votes), the parliament is dissolved, and new legislative elections are held. A party, therefore, needs to control 84 seats to be confident of electing a president.

⁷ Albania Daily News, 20 June 2001.

⁸ The idea was that the nominally independent candidates would vote the party line once in parliament while the party would receive a higher proportion of the seats distributed proportionately in order to "make up" for the apparent discrepancy in the number of direct mandates its official candidates had won.

⁹ Musa Ulqini, press meeting, Tirana, 25 June 2001.

A few days after the 24 June poll, DP officials made their accusations more precise, claiming that Socialist leaders had intervened in certain areas to add votes illegally to their party's allies in order to help them over the 2.5 per cent threshold and into parliament. The DP appeared to be tacitly conceding that the Socialists had won the parliamentary majority necessary to form a government but to be fighting to maintain for itself and its partners enough of a minority (at least 57 seats, 41 per cent) to block the SP also from being able to elect the new president in 2002.

Disputes between the DP and SP representatives on the election commission had prevented around 80,000 people in three districts, including, most importantly, the entire Lushnja district, from voting on 24 June. This necessitated a second round on 8 July that had the potential for changing the initial results, or at least affecting whether the SP's victory would be large enough to assure that party of electing its presidential candidate in 2002. This second round proved far more controversial than the first and gave rise to a greater number of charges of irregularities. Having accepted that the 24 June vote, at least if not overturned by courts, had given the SP control of the parliament and sufficient strength to form the next government, the DP went all out to keep the SP below the 60 per cent level (84 seats) that would mean control also of the presidential decision.

The Socialists instructed their supporters in Lushnja (No. 60 constituency) to vote not for their own party but for three anticipated SP allies – the Agrarian Party, Democratic Alliance and Union of Human Rights – in order to help those parties gain the 2.5 per cent of the national vote each required to enter parliament. The goal of this tactic was to increase the size of the SP's coalition for the 2002 presidential election by another nine members of parliament.¹⁰

The bitterly contested 8 July contest brought little clarity. In Lushnja, the local ("zonal") election commission declared the results null and void. A

week later, however, the Central Election Commission invalidated that decision, took upon itself the powers of the local body and recounted the Lushnja votes itself. That recount gave the Socialists the Lushnja direct mandate and provided significant boosts to two of the small parties prepared to work with the Socialists, the Democratic Alliance and the Union for Human Rights. That was not the end of the matter, however. The Constitutional Court, after hearing multiple complaints from most of the parties, embargoed announcement of final results and ordered a third and then a fourth round of voting in multiple polling stations.¹¹

International observers had reported that a number of serious irregularities occurred on 24 June, including ballot stuffing, detention of election commission members and isolated cases of police interference, but they concluded that these were not significant enough to influence the overall victory of the Socialists. They revised their assessments downward following the second and subsequent rounds as accusations of flagrant electoral fraud escalated. In marked contrast to the October 2000 local elections.¹² Greece said it was satisfied with the way the elections had been conducted in the areas of southern Albania with a substantial Greek minority.

¹⁰ A fourth prospective SP ally, the Social Democrats, got safely over the 2.5 per cent barrier in the first round and were already in line to be allocated at least four seats. See the table of final results below.

¹¹ ICG interview with Genc Lamani, BBC Albanian Section, July 2001.

¹² For detailed discussion of the October 2000 local elections, see ICG Balkans Briefing, *Albania's Local Elections: a Test of Stability and Democracy* (25 August 2000), also ICG Balkans Report No. 111, *Albania: The State of the Nation 2001* (25 May 2001).

A. FINAL RESULTS

After the lengthy process of four ballots, court decisions, and recounts, and subject to revision resulting from any of the still pending legal challenges, it appears that the tally among the parties that received sufficient votes to enter parliament was:

Socialist Party (SP)	41 per cent	73 seats
Democratic Party (DP) and its coalition allies the UfV	36.8 per cent	46 seats
New Democratic Party (NDP),	5.2 per cent	6 seats
Social Democrats	3.6 per cent	4 seats
Human Rights Union	2.6 per cent	3 seats
Agrarian Party	2.5 per cent	3 seats
Democratic Alliance	2.5 per cent	3 seats
Independents		2 seats

The repeated runoffs, particularly the third and fourth, added seats to the opposition side of the aisle but did not change the basic picture that appeared to emerge immediately after 24 June: a Socialist victory that was not, however, large enough to allow that party the luxury of dispensing with a coalition if it desired to assure itself of sufficient support to control the presidency next year.¹³

That result remains controversial, however. A pro-opposition daily hit out at the "collective insanity" of the Central Electoral Commission and the Constitutional Court in awarding contested mandates to the Socialist Party. The paper hinted at a possible boycott of the next government saying that "the 24 June elections were most criminally executed and destroyed ... we have no right to legitimate a manipulated parliament."¹⁴ Reflected in all this was a good deal of real anger that the SP's cheating paid off better than that of the DP. Many independent

observers believe that, had the elections been fully honest, the probable results on a percentage basis in the country as a whole would have been indecisive, if not a virtual dead heat. Moreover, it is widely believed among DP supporters that the international community assisted the manipulation of results in order to avoid the risk that a right-wing, more nationalist-orientated coalition would come to power at a sensitive time in the Balkans. At the least, these attitudes help Berisha stoke the resentment of opposition hardliners as he considers whether to pursue the boycott option.

SP and DP were both on their best behaviour during the 24 June first round when some 250 international observers were present. During the second and subsequent rounds, however, both major parties engaged in blatant ballot stuffing and other irregularities, assisted by friendly local election officials, often in plain view of international observers. Berisha says he will take opposition complaints directly to the European Court of Human Rights because he has no confidence in the Albanian judiciary. While the ultimate result of any such appeal to Strasbourg is problematic, it could well delay effective acceptance of the election and legitimisation of the new parliament and government in the eyes of many Albanians. There is a certain irony in Berisha's discovery of international guarantees for fair electoral process since he and his party's manipulation of the 1996 parliamentary election, and associated police brutality, were heavily condemned by international monitors at the time. The Albanian population as a whole, which throughout the summer's dreary electoral shenanigans shamed the politicians by behaving in an orderly and responsible manner, has some justification for feeling let down by their representatives.

B. HOW AND WHY THE SOCIALISTS WON

Albanian politics have traditionally demonstrated a sharp north-south divide. Demographically it can be argued that this is no longer very meaningful since only 500,000 of the country's 3.5 million population still live in the north. Perhaps another 500,000 persons have moved south into new settlements over the past decade. Nevertheless, the geographical division still shows up on the electoral map. The opposition DP scored a virtual sweep of northern

¹³To obtain the 84 votes needed to elect a president in parliament in 2002, the SP will need to add the votes of four smaller parties – the Social Democrats, the Human Rights Union, the Agrarians, and the Democratic Alliance – to the 73 it controls in its own name.

¹⁴*Rilindja Demokratike*, 18 July 2001.

constituencies¹⁵ while the SP, as usual, did well in southern districts. Voters in both halves of the country cast their ballots for more of the same on the local scene – in the north for continued regional DP predominance, in the south for leaving uninterrupted leadership networks that control illicit profits from smuggling in areas close to the Greek border.

A combination of its record for efficiency since taking office and old-fashioned pump priming contributed significantly to SP success. In the run-up to the election, the government attempted to demonstrate its effectiveness via a number of highly visible projects. A new four-lane highway from Tirana to the port of Durres and its surrounding beaches – the main escape route from Tirana's stifling summer heat – has proved immensely popular. It is now possible to drive to Durres in twenty minutes, saving time and petrol and with reduced risk of injury because of the safety improvements made to the road. A major telecommunication upgrade has meant that for the first time it is possible to telephone directly to anywhere in Albania, thus helping to relieve the isolation of rural communities and link families whose children have moved to the towns.¹⁶

The centre of Tirana is undergoing a huge face-lift. The central park, destroyed by illegal construction of hundreds of buildings during the Berisha years, has been restored. Elderly people, previously too terrified to go near the park in the evening because of its sinister reputation, can now sit on new benches beside freshly sown grass, chatting to friends as they did in communist times. The facades of all government buildings and many apartment blocks have been getting paint jobs. These are real feel-good achievements that allow people at last to have a tangible sense of government-in-action. During the clearing of Tirana's central park, people were

impressed by the government's seeming impartiality, something hitherto unknown in Albania: A large building at one end of the park, reputedly owned by the Hajdari clan (prominent opposition supporters) and the "Lady Diana" restaurant at the opposite end, owned by members of Socialist Party leader Fatos Nano's clan, were both demolished.

The Meta government has been the country's most effective since the collapse of communism, but there is also some measure of truth in the claim by the pro-NDP daily, *Albania*, that the Socialists won not because of their own merit, but rather because of the opposition's weakness.¹⁷ Despite the conciliatory tone that Berisha adopted in the campaign, what he called the "New Beginning" lacked general credibility. As another newspaper put it, the people of Albania voted "No to the irrationality of Berisha, who became rational far too late."¹⁸

Prime Minister Meta's government also benefited from well-publicised international support in the pre-election period. In May 2001, President Bush met Meta personally, and two days prior to the 24 June first round, the Albanian ambassador in Washington was given a goodwill message. The EU gave Meta what was widely considered implicit approval by opening negotiations for an Association and Stabilisation Agreement. Such gestures are meaningful for a people historically imbued with the notion of Great Power patronage.

Another contributor, though an indirect one, to the Socialists' victory was the worsening situation in Macedonia. Most Albanians were relieved that the national question was left out of the election. There was a genuine fear that Berisha's strongly nationalist bent, though largely kept in check during the campaign, might bring Albania into the conflict. His close contacts with prominent figures on the right of Kosovo Albanian politics are well known, and many people remember the assistance Berisha received from that quarter when he launched his abortive coup d'etat in 1998. Although Meta was the first Albanian leader to establish relations with all ethnic Albanian elements in the former Yugoslavia, he has refrained from involving himself, and his country, in their domestic political affairs, which appears to be how the majority of Albanians want matters to stay.

¹⁵ the Socialists did capture the northeastern town of Kukes. However, this town is an anomaly, its present population predominantly not local. When Kukes was flooded in 1976 to make way for an artificial dam, many original inhabitants moved away.

¹⁶ A number of these projects were begun, or at least conceived, under the previous Socialist administration of Pandeli Majko, which could not carry them out because of the poor internal security situation and the outbreak of the Kosovo war. The Meta administration made them a priority in the past two years.

¹⁷ *Albania*, 11 July 2001.

¹⁸ *Dita*, 11 June 2001.

C. THE NEED FOR ELECTORAL REFORM

The summer's four rounds of balloting highlighted structural weaknesses in the electoral system, particularly the manner for allocating the 40 proportional seats, and undermined confidence in the process. This has led to calls for legislation to diminish the opportunity for government interference and to convert the system to an entirely proportional one. Whatever system is in force the next time Albanians go to the polls, it is clear that great efforts need to be concentrated on improved procedures. Worthwhile reforms to consider include safer ballot boxes and their quicker transport, monitoring of polling stations by camera, use of more secure ballot papers and of computer technology, and, of course, above all, preventing illegal interventions by the police and the intelligence service.¹⁹

IV. THE NEW GOVERNMENT

A. COMPOSITION

Decisions on the composition of the new government were delayed first by the repeated revotes, then by Socialist leader Fatos Nano's hospitalisation following an automobile accident, and finally by the need to resolve a bitter fight over who would become prime minister.²⁰ The SP has the votes in parliament to govern alone but decided to build another coalition, primarily to position itself for the 2002 presidential vote but also to demonstrate that it has no dictatorial instincts. Nevertheless, the old coalition – Alliance for the State – will almost certainly be scrapped in favour of new alignments. The SP came to power in 1997 with a very broad coalition that narrowed as a result of defections in the run up to this summer's elections. When asked why this had occurred, Prime Minister Meta replied "Four years ago when the Socialists came to power, we were very generous by giving seats free of charge to the Social Democrats and the Democratic Alliance by removing SP candidates and by giving ministries to coalition partners. But we saw that this was not very efficient so we made some unpopular changes."²¹ Now new deals and compromises are required.

The Democratic Alliance and the Agrarian Party, each with three members in parliament, are almost certain to join the new government. Less certain is whether the SP will strike a deal with the Social Democrats and the Union for Human Rights. The former gathered more than 3 per cent of the vote and is expected to have four representatives in parliament. As a left-wing party and fellow member of the Socialist International, it is the closest ideological ally of the Socialists. Considerable recent friction between the two will have to be set aside, however.

¹⁹ The daily newspaper *Albania* argued that greater reliance on technology would make it more difficult for Albania's politicians to engage in their traditional electoral chicanery, 21 July 2001.

²⁰ For resolution of the fight over the office of prime minister, see Section V below.

²¹ ICG interview with Prime Minister Ilir Meta, Tirana, June, 2001.

B. POLICIES

The new government is expected to maintain its predecessor's stance on ethnic Albanian aspirations in the former Yugoslavia. On 23 June 2001, the day before the first round of voting, a visibly relaxed and confident Ilir Meta reiterated his mantra that political dialogue is the only way to solve ethnic tensions in Macedonia. He dismissed fears that should the conflict there continue, Albania would find itself drawn into a more confrontational role with Skopje: "If the situation in Macedonia escalates, we will be able to contain national pressure. The position of this government has always been very mature. The international community expected us to become very emotional over the issue of Macedonia, but we were able to resist the pressure. If Macedonia is stable, that is good because it doesn't hurt us. The basis of our foreign policy is the building of strong, stable relations with our neighbours."²² Meta also reconfirmed his government's commitment to building closer relations with the European Union and its desire to join NATO.

C. ETHNIC ALBANIAN REACTIONS

This is what the international community wants to hear, and what the ethnic Albanians of the former Yugoslavia expect to hear from Tirana. The latter saw Albania's elections as a bit of a sideshow. By and large, except for die-hard Berisha supporters around the Democratic League of Kosovo, the Kosovo Albanians are content with the election result since it has produced what they wanted: an Albanian government which has little influence in districts adjacent to the Kosovo border,²³ rather than a strongly nationalist government in Tirana that might be tempted to meddle in their affairs. Although there is little Kosovo Albanians can do to stop Tirana "selling out" (as they tend to see it) to the international community on the national question, geography is important. The Kosovo Albanians realise that the Socialist victory has no effect on their ground. With the DP having won virtually all the constituencies along the Kosovo border, the same local police who, once bribed,

turn a blind eye to the trafficking of weapons and the military training of young men will remain in control in the north. Life should continue much as before, with little interference from Tirana. With a view to Kosovo's own province-wide elections on 14 November 2001, the Albania results displease Rugova's LDK but are reasonably satisfactory for everyone else.

²² Ibid.

²³ That is, in the districts that continue to be controlled by the out-of-power DP party, see below.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE POLITICAL PARTIES

A. THE WINNERS

Victory has not healed the pre-electoral divisions between the two main camps in the Socialist Party. Relations between Meta, the prime minister, and Nano, the party chairman, had been strained for some time but they had muted their differences in the outgoing legislature, and few had predicted a fierce battle this year.²⁴ Following the election triumph, however, many in Nano's camp concluded that Meta was dispensable. For their part, the prime minister's supporters indicated they feared a revival of the chairman's party dictatorship. Despite his campaign confirmation to an electorate interested in stability that Meta would continue in office if the SP won, Nano manoeuvred to advance one of his loyalists. His concern was that Meta, if he remained at the head of government, would be able to strengthen his personal position to the degree that he could soon challenge Nano for control of the party.²⁵ Rather than risk this, Nano openly threw his support to the former finance minister, Arben Malaj.

The party's choice was made on the evening of 21 August by a secret vote in the General Steering Committee. It had been thought that body was closely divided between Nano and Meta supporters. Meta defeated Malaj decisively, however, by 84 to 29.²⁶ This was a tremendous vote of confidence for Meta and a serious blow to Nano, who was reportedly ashen-faced upon hearing the results. Meta has become increasingly powerful over the past year. He rallied strong local support by passing out important jobs to supporters from his native district, Skrapar, and pinned down the backing of the Socialist youth forum he led for much of the 1990s by appointing his wife, Monika Kryemathi, its leader. It is widely acknowledged that Meta is largely responsible for bringing

many swing votes to the Socialists. Some SP leaders apparently worried that if they were now to throw him out of office, many who thought they were casting ballots for continuity and stability might feel only a little less cheated than the DP opposition. Nano still retains considerable strength in the party organisation, however, and unless a compromise between the feuding camps is reached, the Socialists could find themselves suffering from the same kind of fractures that in recent years have increasingly plagued the Democratic Party.

B. THE LOSERS

There are growing calls from within the Democratic Party and from media close to it for Sali Berisha to step down and allow the DP to elect a new leader and reform itself in time to effectively contest the next elections. Former DP chairman Tritan Shehu, sacked by Berisha three years ago and now a senior leader of the breakaway New Democratic Party, argues that unattractive DP leadership rather than unpopular centre-right ideas determined the election and that the only cure, consequently, is radical change at the top of the party. He believes, however, that his former chief will not analyse the reasons for his defeat candidly. Instead, Shehu says, Berisha will hold the international community responsible for backing Meta and invent internal party enemies.²⁷

Indeed, if he is consistent, Berisha is likely to engage in the same kind of disruptive and confrontational moves that characterised his leadership of the DP over the last four years. Berisha has never accepted a defeat as definitive. After leading the DP to victory in Albania's first multiparty election in March 1992, he suffered multiple reversals, beginning with local votes just three months after that initial triumph. A crushing defeat in the 1994 constitutional referendum and a "victory" gained in the 1996 parliamentary balloting that featured blatant cheating was followed by losses in the 1997 parliamentary and October 2000 local elections. Several factors may, nevertheless, combine to make this most recent setback harder for Berisha to shake off: his coalition lost by a relatively decisive margin; the Socialists already appear assured of being able to choose the next president; and the New Democratic Party is likely to continue

²⁴ *Albania Daily News*, 21 July 2001

²⁵ Albanian political leaders are still primarily beholden to clans and their home regions but a prime minister has the ability to use patronage and other perquisites of power to expand his vital local base.

²⁶ A third candidate, Spartak Poci, received five votes.

²⁷ *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 20 July 2001.

to drain away members from the DP as long as he remains at its head.

The most serious threat to Berisha's political future probably comes from behind-the-scenes networking aimed at paving the way for a reunion with the NDP. Shehu hints at the prospect of just that sort of reconciliation if, as he puts it, progressive forces within the DP study the election closely. It is too early to count Berisha out, however. He has survived political defeats in the past, is notoriously stubborn, and will be hard to remove if he chooses not to go. Senior DP officials are dividing into two distinct camps: those who want to reform the party under new leadership, and those who are sticking by Berisha - for the time being. Prime Minister Meta, for one, appears to believe that he will continue to face his old rival for some time.²⁸

C. THE THIRD FORCE

The success of the New Democrat Party (NDP), led by Genc Pollo, was one of the surprises of the summer's balloting. Formed just six months ago, it won 5.2 per cent of the vote. The NDP, which describes itself as Albania's only serious centre-right party, is now confirmed as the third largest political force in the country. It claimed it would have scored even better results had there not been vote manipulation to the detriment of its candidates in nine constituencies, including four in which the similarity of party symbols facilitated all its votes being given to Berisha's Democratic Party. However, the NDP clearly also benefited to some degree from the confusion of those who thought they were giving their support to DP candidates.²⁹

The NDP has gained credibility in a very short time. The party is expected to play a constructive role in the next parliament and a decisive one in the future of the Democratic Party, from the ranks of which many of its members came. The sheer difficulty in effecting internal reform

within the DP if Berisha remains at its head is likely to result in significant further defections to the new party.

²⁸ ICG interview with Prime Minister Ilir Meta, Tirana, June 2001. In a direct reference to the recent British elections, Meta pointed out that "in other countries, leaders of losing parties resign. In Albania they think of reasons not to resign."

²⁹ Voting lists were indeed confusing, providing no clear party identification on the actual ballot paper.

VI. CONCLUSION

Despite considerable resentment of what is perceived as a heavily corrupt, Greek-controlled "southern" government, Albanians voted the Socialists into a second term of office this summer. They did so primarily because they believed the internal stability and moderate economic growth they had become accustomed to since the anarchy of 1997/1998 were most likely to continue under a Socialist-led government. National security concerns were a contributory, if secondary, factor. The Albanian electorate appears relatively little interested in the demands of ethnic Albanians in the former Yugoslavia. With violence in Macedonia rising as they were going to the polls, many Albanians considered that the Socialists would pursue a safer policy on the national question.

Until and unless the DP corrects its disarray, it will not be an effective opposition. The challenge for the Socialists, by contrast, is to avoid the temptation to govern in an arrogant and complacent manner. Far too many Albanian politicians still see politics in terms of personal power and family enrichment, the embodiment of the so-called "clan mentality". Prime Minister Meta professes to believe that Albania must "build a more productive political class".³⁰ In fact, a new generation of politicians is entering the political arena, creating some possibility that parliament will begin to have more balanced and less polarised debate. The majority of Albanians agree that politics will never truly settle down until both Berisha and Nano leave the stage. In contrast to Berisha's bleak prospects, however, his arch rival, Nano, still has reasonable chances to make a comeback, possibly as the next president, despite the embarrassing collapse of his effort to remove Meta.

Internal party politics aside, the orderly, if not above board, conduct of the elections, and the decision by the political parties to raise their complaints through legal channels, demonstrated a degree of political maturity. Albania now sorely needs a period of tranquil politics to consolidate the gains it has made over the last

few years. This may not be possible, however. The allegations of voting manipulations and irregularities have cast a serious shadow over the Socialists' victory. The opposition came to this year's election genuinely convinced the Socialists had stolen the 1997 elections. It now believes this is also true of the 2001 elections. The months leading up to selection of a new president next year, therefore, may well witness the commencement of popular protest rallies and at least a partial boycott of the parliamentary process by the opposition. None of that bodes well for a country that only four years ago was on the brink of a civil war and must still navigate the currents of ethnic nationalism on several of its borders.

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³⁰ ICG interview with Prime Minister Ilir Meta, Tirana, June, 2001



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