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ALBANIA'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 1997



**Prepared by the Staff of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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This report is based on the observations of two staff advisors of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Commission) deployed as short-term election observers in Albania for the June 29 elections. One observed the elections from Elbasan, the other from Saranda. The Commission wishes to thank the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights for organizing their visit, and to the Greek, Italian and Romanian military units deployed in the field as part of the Multilateral Protection Force which facilitated their security.

For additional Commission information on previous elections and other developments in Albania, see:

Briefing on Albania: Finding a Way Out of the Abyss—May 1997

Briefing on the Controversial Albanian Elections—June 1996

Report on the Albanian Parliamentary Elections of 1996—June 1996

Hearing on Challenges to Democracy in Albania—March 1996

Report on Albania's Second Multi-Party Elections—April 1992

Hearing on Democratic Developments in Albania—May 1991

Report on the Elections in Albania—April 1991

SUMMARY

As a proposed solution to the profound political crisis which gripped the country, Albania held new elections in June and July 1997 for 155 seats in its unicameral parliament, the National Assembly. These were the fourth parliamentary elections in Albania since the collapse of the one-party Communist state in December 1990, and were held just over a year since the last elections, which were considered highly irregular and contributed to the crisis of authority throughout most of 1997.

Albania emerged from decades of ruthless, isolationist Stalinist rule in the early 1990s and had made relatively great strides in the development of human rights and economic progress since the Democratic Party came to power in 1992. Social polarization stalled the development of a civic society, however, and contributed to a trend of increasingly limited tolerance of opposition which began in late 1994. Painting the Socialist Party—the former Communists—and its supporters as a threat to the gains made to date, the ruling Democrats and their supporters used the Socialist boycott and irregular electoral tactics to trounce the opposition in regularly scheduled elections in May 1996. The subsequent government was thus plagued by an absence of legitimacy that left it completely unable to respond to open rebellion, especially in the southern part of the country, following the collapse of “pyramid” investment schemes in which a significant share of the Albanian population had invested heavily. Most people blamed the government for allowing the schemes to function. Hundreds of people were killed in the ensuing violence, much of it related to the formation of rival gangs in Vlora and other southern cities, where “salvation committees” formed to replace local authorities. Complete civil war and anarchy were averted only with international intervention, which included the mediating efforts of the OSCE, the deployment of a multinational protection force to secure humanitarian aid deliveries, and close supervision of preparations for new elections that could restore authority. A coalition government, led by a Socialist, was formed in March 1997 on an interim basis to provide some confidence in the state until the elections could be held in late June.

In order to hold elections quickly, the norms for free and fair elections were, in many respects, abandoned. The international community pressed the Albanian parties, which were jockeying for political advantage to the detriment of the country’s stability, only for minimal standards necessary for the will of the people to be expressed. Given the fear caused by ongoing violence, the lack of objective media to inform the population, the poor infrastructure, and the lack of security in many parts of the country, even these minimum standards were achieved only with great effort, and the elections were deemed acceptable. The results gave a victory for the Socialist Party, although continued international involvement will seek to encourage some power sharing in order to prevent further political polarization and retribution against a new opposition. The voters defeated a concurrent referendum on establishing Albania as a constitutional monarchy.

Whether the elections will restore legitimate authority and reunite the country remains to be seen. The strong role of personalities in Albanian politics and the absence of any public understanding of how a democracy is supposed to function undoubtedly mean that Albania will remain in a tenuous state of transition for years to come, and that progress necessitates continued international involvement. If the international community, frustrated by the behavior of Albania’s political leaders, decides to limit its involvement, the country might again fall into violent chaos with potentially dangerous regional repercussions. Fortunately, two of the stronger states in the area, Italy and Greece, seem prepared to remain active in assisting their neighbor, and the OSCE, along with other European institutions, seems willing to remain engaged.

THE SETTING

Albania is a mountainous country of 3.4 million people on the southeast coast of the Adriatic Sea, bordering Montenegro, Kosovo (Serbia), Macedonia and Greece. Most of its citizens are ethnic Albanians, although a sizable Greek population in the south comprises 3 to 4 percent of the population. A few smaller groups, including Roma (Gypsies), exist as well. The majority of Albanians are Muslims, culturally if not by faith, with Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians representing the remainder. Tirana, the capital, has about 400,000 inhabitants. There are other cities, but the country's population is largely rural.

Albania emerged as an independent state from the waning Ottoman Empire in 1912, only to undergo the trauma of World War I and subsequent efforts by European powers to divide it among its neighbors. The 1920s saw a brief democratic respite under the leadership of Fan Noli, followed by the somewhat dictatorial rule of King Zog from 1928 until the outbreak of World War II in 1939. During that war, the country was occupied by Mussolini's fascist Italy until 1943, and subsequently by Nazi Germany. The Communist partisans of Enver Hoxha liberated the country in 1944 and defeated the rival resistance, the National Front or, in Albanian, *Balli Kombetar*. Hoxha ruled Albania for the next four decades, imposing a strictly Stalinist regime and breaking first from the Soviet Union and then China as these countries underwent relative reform in the 1960s and 1970s, respectively. Hoxha's successor in 1985, Ramiz Alia, was less fanatical and developed limited ties with neighboring countries, but Albania remained the most impoverished, repressed and isolated country in Eastern Europe when the wave of political pluralism swept the region in 1989 and 1990.

The first known stirring among the population were riots which took place in the northern city of Shkoder in late 1989. Apparently learning from the violent collapse of the Ceausescu regime in Romania, which allegedly also had complete control over its citizenry, Alia opted for symbolic reforms and replaced notorious hardliners in 1990. Student demonstrations at the end of the year, however, compelled the Albanian leadership to acquiesce to permitting alternative political parties. In March 1991, the Communists changed their name from the Party of Labor to the Socialist Party in the first multi-party elections and maintained their power through less than free and fair conditions for elections, lingering rural support and limited development of an opposition. Their inability to govern in the face of deteriorating conditions, however, forced new elections one year later, in which a more prepared Democratic Party was able to win a majority.

Between the March 1992 and May 1996 elections, Albanian politics was marked by considerable stability as the new President, Sali Berisha, and leadership undertook further political and economic reforms that, by Albanian standards, were unprecedented, albeit not firmly put into place. By 1994, however, progress seemed to decelerate, especially after the ruling party's draft constitution was defeated in a referendum. The flawed justice provided in trials of former Communist leaders, including Socialist Party leader Fatos Nano, for corruption or misuse of power, and of ethnic Greek activists for violent acts of separatism, overshadowed the question of the actual guilt of those charged. The removal of the Chief of the Court of Cassation, Zef Brozi, by questionable means in 1995 heightened concern about the independence of the judiciary. Harassment of journalists, especially those of the newspaper *Kohe Jone* (Our Time) as its content increasingly opposed the government, underlined official discomfort with a free media as well.

Albania's democratic shortcomings culminated in the severely flawed parliamentary elections of May 1996. Beyond the problems which detracted from the campaign period, including a broadcast media favoring the Democratic Party and a "Genocide Law" which denied, through a non-public review, persons affiliated with the Communist regime from seeking office, election day itself saw major irregularities, including the intimidation of opposition party members of polling committees and their non-inclusion in the actual operation of the committees. Encouraged by a Socialist Party pullout on election day, during the vote count ballots were flagrantly invalidated by polling committees to the detriment of opposition candidates and parties. The ability of Democratic Party supporters to take control of the streets and celebrate victory before polling committees finished the count contrasted starkly with the brutal break-up of a small opposition rally in Tirana a few days later. The results— 122 of 140 seats going to the Democratic Party—was a clear signal that pluralism in the country was endangered. Several international voices, including the Swiss Chair-in-Office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, called for a partial or complete rerun of the elections. Albanian officials dismissed the idea, however, alleging that the opposition Socialists had manipulated the foreign observation effort.

Meanwhile, the economic front took a turn sharply for the worse. For several years, "pyramid" investment schemes had been flourishing in Albania, promising individual investors high interest rates. The schemes initially seemed able to sustain themselves, due allegedly to ties with the illicit drug trade, organized crime and highly profitable smuggling into Serbia and Montenegro, which were under international economic sanctions at the time. By late 1996, however, some of the schemes began to falter, and the collapse of five of them in early 1997 prompted massive public protest in which investors blamed the government for not regulating such schemes. In the south, a full-scale uprising emerged, as local rebels formed into gangs, stormed police and military sites to seize weapons, and assumed control over their towns and cities. The rebellion, which was particularly violent in the port city of Vlora, crept northward as local populations felt free to loot and pillage as well, with hundreds killed in the process. Over 15,000 persons fled to Italy, and prison doors were opened across the country. In response to the anarchy, President Berisha assumed emergency powers. On March 1, he obtained the resignation of Aleksander Meksi, who had served as Prime Minister since 1992. The Assembly then elected Berisha to a second five-year term as President.

As law enforcement and the military structure collapsed in the face of the uprising, only the population's seizure of weapons in the north, motivated more by self-defense than protest, and ongoing mediating by former Austrian Chancellor Franz Vranitzky, serving as the Personal Representative of the OSCE's Danish Chair-in-Office, prevented a complete collapse into chaos. Instead, the country was essentially divided between the north nominally under the control of the government and the south under the control of rebel-formed "salvation committees." While the situation stabilized, large areas remained essentially lawless, especially due to gang activity at night, and curfews were imposed throughout the country. The death toll soon exceeded 1,000. Berisha approved a new coalition "Government of National Reconciliation" on March 9, led by Socialist Party member Bashkim Fino, which included ten political parties. The international community formalized the role of Franz Vranitzky as its leading representative in responding to the crisis, and a 6,000-strong Multinational Protection Force (MPF)—led by Italy and including troops from Austria, Denmark, France, Greece, Romania, Slovenia, Spain and Turkey—was deployed in April to secure the delivery of humanitarian aid.

All parties agreed that new elections would have to be held as soon as possible in order to reunite the country, and consensus evolved around a late June date. President Berisha resisted calls for his resignation,

agreeing to do so only if the Democrats were defeated at the polls. Meanwhile, the son of King Zog, Leka, returned to Albania in April. Except for a very brief time with limited freedom in 1993, this was his first visit to the country since his father, who passed away in 1961, fled with his family in the face of the Italian fascist invasion at the onset of World War II. After decades in exile in Spain, the United Kingdom and South Africa, Leka sought support for the restoration of the monarchy, and agreement was reached to hold a referendum on the issue along with the parliamentary elections.

How had Albania, which had shown such remarkable progress in the early 1990s, descended to the point of anarchy in 1997? The massive losses in the collapse of the pyramid schemes were enough to cause a spontaneous uprising. Total losses, amounting to 1.2 billion dollars, exceeded half of the country's gross domestic product. While they were going strong, the schemes were popular all around. The people obviously invested in them, government officials associated themselves with them, and the opposition likely would have taken political advantage of any attempt to control them. As things went awry, however, everyone looked to the government to act, and it was the government which failed to take sufficient responsibility. This easily permitted those who alleged the Democratic Party had stolen people's votes in 1996 to gain credibility by claiming that the Democratic Party had now stolen their money as well. People became desperate and angry, with an annual inflation rate skyrocketing to an estimated 70 percent, and the currency—the lek—losing 80 percent of its value compared to the dollar. Industrial production came to a standstill.

Despite the severity of the economic woes, the nearly complete collapse of civil order in Albania cannot be fully explained without looking at the larger context of recent political developments. Here, viewpoints range from Berisha's alleged dictatorial predisposition to claims of Socialist conspiracies. In between these extremes pointing to intentionally undemocratic acts by one side or the other, a common lack of a democratic history, the social trauma of extreme Communist repression and Albania's unique cultural setting are frequently cited as less concrete but more certain contributors to the crisis.

When the Democratic Party won control of the Albanian Government in 1992, it held the greatest promise for bringing freedom and prosperity to the country, and it did deliver considerably to this end. At the same time, Sali Berisha, while perhaps well-intentioned, was too forceful a personality to allow the situation to develop gradually and on its own, and personalities matter in a vacuum of institutional checks-and-balances. Without proper constitutional controls, the office of the President became dangerously strong. Berisha failed, moreover, to distance himself as President of the country from the leadership of the Democratic Party, and hence was unable to act as a moderating force on political polarization. The regular loss of key leaders within the Democratic Party since 1992, along with the corrupting perks of unchecked power, locked Berisha and his remaining supporters into a position where confrontation became likely if not inevitable.

At the same time, the Socialist Party failed to reform thoroughly since losing its monopoly on power, and it did much, as the leading opposition party, to instigate problems and obstruct progress. While those in the majority and governing the country are not to be absolved from their responsibilities as a result, nor should those in the minority and leading the opposition be cast as simply innocent victims in the dangerously polarized situation which developed. Indeed, for some of them political polarization seemed to be just what they had desired all along. More responsible opposition parties exist, but they lacked the strength of the Socialists to influence the course of events.

The international community, especially the United States, had earlier been influential in guiding Albania's transition, but some officials' decidedly "anti-Berisha" slant, along with an evident lack of political will in responding to conflict and repression nearby in the former Yugoslavia, generated cynicism among many Albanian leaders regarding outside criticism that, as a last resort, could have made some difference. Questions regarding the objectivity of the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights in observing the 1996 elections, justified or not, only diminished external institutions' credibility. Once rebellion began, however, only the active involvement of Franz Vranitzky, the support he received from the OSCE and other European institutions, and the strongly expressed interest of Italy and other contributors to the MPF made elections in June 1997 possible.

PRE-ELECTION PREPARATIONS

Contested in the June 29 parliamentary elections were 155 seats in the unicameral National Assembly. Of these, 115 seats were contested using the majoritarian system, in which candidates ran in single-seat constituencies. Each district, or zone, had a population of about 18-22,000. Run-offs would occur between the two leading candidates one week later in those zones where no one candidate received over 50 percent of the votes cast. The remaining 40 seats were decided on a proportional basis, in which voters would select a political party and those receiving more than two percent of the votes cast would receive their requisite share of seats. The Democratic Party favored the majoritarian system, which seemed to work to its advantage, while all remaining parties preferred a proportional election with a low threshold for representation of only two percent that would facilitate seats for smaller political parties.

In light of these differences, the sudden passage in mid-May of an amended election law by the Democratic Party-controlled Assembly, before its dissolution, moved several opposition parties to the verge of a boycott and the brink of resumed conflict. While the 115 to 40 split of the seats seemed acceptable, the opposition parties did not like the manner in which the law passed, and there remained differences on how the proportional seats would actually be allocated. Looking for a way out, the Socialist Party agreed to the law on condition that the international community guarantee the elections would be free and fair. OSCE Personal Representative Vranitzky noted that the Albanians themselves were responsible for actual administration of the elections, and that such a guarantee therefore was impossible, but the OSCE agreed to provide substantial technical support and to organize a comprehensive foreign observer effort. This effort included the deployment of about 80 long-term observers and over 500 short-term observers. A Special Coordinator for Certification, French Euro-parliamentarian Catherine Lalumiere, together with Sir Russell Johnston of the Council of Europe and Javier Ruperez of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, were tasked to assess the quality of the elections, and Albanian parties pledged to accept their determination.

Administration of the elections was conducted at three levels. At the top was the Central Electoral Commission, under which were 115 zonal electoral commissions, under which were 4,525 polling committees, one for each polling station. For each level, there was to be a chairman, vice-chairman, secretary and representatives from the political parties or other groupings participating in the elections. Unlike the situation one year earlier, representatives of opposition parties, especially the Socialist Party, were fully integrated into the electoral apparatus at all three levels.

Major problems occurred in the organization of the elections. During the rebellion, voter registration lists had been destroyed in many areas, and new lists had to be created by going door-to-door. Resources

for those engaged in this arduous task were limited. Moreover, the registration of candidates and appointment of election officials at local levels were slow, almost to the point of causing a postponement of the election date. While recognizing that it was possible to create “minimum conditions” for legitimate elections on June 29, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs found on June 15 that “to proceed with elections that would fail and thereby exacerbate the current political crisis” was a worse option than a short delay, despite “strong and reasoned arguments” that had been made against any delay. Three days later, Albanian authorities were prodded by the OSCE Ministerial Troika—Denmark, Poland and Switzerland—to “immediately provide the remaining information which is essential for printing ballot papers; set up all Zone Election Commissions and all Polling Station Committees; [and] distribute all voting materials in good time.” The outside prodding worked, and the electoral commissions at all levels, while missing many deadlines, appeared ready just as election day approached.

THE PLAYERS

Twenty-seven political parties competed in the parliamentary elections, although, in the highly polarized political environment, they generally fit into a few main categories. Indeed, many of them formally joined coalitions with like-minded parties, or, by rejecting a coalition with one or another party, associated themselves with others. A total of 1,112 candidates were successfully registered. The principal parties or groups of parties were:

The Democratic Party: This was the first political party to form in December 1990, when alternatives to the ruling Communist party were first legally permitted. It also became by far the largest party, as its ranks swelled with those opposed to continued Communist rule. The Democrats failed to win the first elections in which they could compete, in March 1991, lacking the resources to get their message out less than three months after founding the party. In March 1992, however, the party did win a majority in new elections, and its charismatic leader, Sali Berisha, became President of the country. Since that time, many other leaders, including Gramoz Pashko and Eduard Selami, either left or were expelled from the party due to personal or political differences, and party ideology tended toward the right of center. In May 1996, the Democrats solidified their power with a landslide victory in regularly scheduled elections that were nevertheless viewed by many as severely flawed. The party, chaired by Tritan Shehu, has been plagued by corruption among its members. The Social Democratic Union Party, led by Teodor Laco, supports the Democratic Party, breaking away from the larger Social Democratic Party when the latter aligned itself with the Socialists.

The Socialist Party: Originally the Communist Party and then the Party of Labor, this was the party which held a complete monopoly on political power in the country from 1944 to 1990, when alternative political parties were permitted to form. While it adapted to the new pluralism and retired some older leaders, the party did little in the way of actual reform until 1996, when it formally abandoned Marxist-Leninist ideology. Because of its previous status and resources, and perhaps because some Albanians feel uncomfortable with the uncertainty associated with democratic transition and market reform, the Socialist Party continues to have popular support despite its brutal legacy, and it is the only real challenger to the Democratic Party. The current Socialist leader, Fatos Nano, had been serving a prison sentence for corruption since 1994, until released during the crisis earlier this year. He was perceived beforehand as a moderate within the party who acquiesced to the loss of power in 1992 and even took issue, from prison, with his deputies for withdrawing from the 1996 elections on election day. Since being freed from prison, however, he seems to have taken more traditional Socialist positions and to have given the most prominent

positions to hard-liners. Some smaller parties, like the Agrarian Party, have remained very close to the Socialist Party.

The Social Democratic Party and the Democratic Alliance: These are the most credible alternatives to the two main parties, although their actual strength is limited to providing credibility to one or the other main parties by association and shifting the balance in case of a close result. Both are viewed as in the political center. The Social Democratic Party was founded by its current chairman, Skender Gjinushi, and was originally supportive of the Democratic Party but gradually moved away during the course of that party's rule. It was viewed as in the center during the 1996 elections, but the party has moved much closer to the Socialist Party in light of the results of those elections and subsequent developments. A splinter group, calling itself the Social Democratic Union Party, however, remained close to the Democrats. The Democratic Alliance, while viewed in a light similar to that of the Social Democratic Party, actually formed as a splinter of the Democratic Party in 1992, when its leaders, Neritan Ceka and Gramoz Pashko, broke from Democratic Party ranks over differences with Sali Berisha. The Democratic Alliance has often been portrayed as consisting of neo-Communists, but in fact had maintained some distance from the Socialist Party until these elections.

The National Front and the Legality Party: These are both right-wing parties which established a coalition for the elections. The National Front—known also by its Albanian name, *Balli Kombetar*—dates back to the 1940s as a resistance movement to the Italian and German fascist occupation, only to be defeated by the rival Communist partisans. Led by Abaz Ermenji and Hysen Selfo, it remains popular among the Albanian diaspora. The Legality Party is essentially the monarchist party of Albania, supporting the installation of King Zog's son Leka as a constitutional monarch. Popular frustration over the current political situation in Albania has improved the status of these parties.

The Union for Human Rights: This party represents the interests of the Greek minority in Albania, and was founded in 1992 when ethnically based organizations, such as the Greek group *Omonia*, were prohibited from participating in elections as a political party. It has since broadened to include advocacy of minority and human rights for all, but it remains essentially a party based in the south where most ethnic Greeks reside. Its chairman is Vasil Melo.

The Republican Party, the Christian Democratic Party and the National Unity Party: These are all right-of-center parties of little consequence. The Republican Party, led since its founding by Sabri Godo, was one of the earliest political parties formed when pluralism was introduced in 1990. In election after election, however, it failed to produce more than a few victorious candidates. Its focus has been primarily on property restitution. The Christian Democratic Party has its base in the northern part of the country, and is frequently called the party representing the interests of the Roman Catholics. The National Unity Party claims to represent the interests of all Albanians by advocating the unification of historically Albanian-inhabited regions in all countries neighboring Albania.

THE CAMPAIGN

The campaign period could not be considered normal by any standard, due to the division of the country and the resulting lack of security for candidates and party representatives. In the south, the Democratic Party was effectively denied the opportunity to campaign. When it attempted to do so, local members of "salvation committees" intervened. When Democratic Party official Leonard Demi attempted to campaign in the southern port city of Saranda, for example, he was apprehended and severely beaten for

several hours before being released. The committee in Vlora declared that, if President Berisha were to come to the city, he would be “shot at with all available arms.”

The Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Party, on the other hand, were able to campaign in the south, although some rallies, such as in Berat, were followed by violence in which opposing sides claim the other to have been responsible. Some rebel leaders, on the other hand, became candidates of these parties. This has led to claims that these leading opposition parties may have actually instigated the earlier insurrection to undermine Democratic Party rule, although, as a practical matter, rebel leaders quite naturally targeted the party in power as their enemy. The opposition parties, therefore, might simply have taken advantage of the situation by cooperating with those having power at the local level. Given the criminal nature of some local leaders, however, the degree to which they have done so raises questions about their judgment.

In the north, there was greater freedom for campaigning. Opposition parties were able to hold rallies, although security always remained questionable. In one case, Socialist Party official Rexhep Mejdani was ambushed on his way to a rally; he was not injured but the rally was canceled. Socialist Party leader Fatos Nano similarly was unable to attend a rally that was held in the city of Rreshen. A grenade was thrown toward President Berisha during one Democratic Party rally near the port city of Durrës. In Lushnjë two days before the elections, gunfire broke out at the end of another rally attended by Berisha, injuring eight people.

The role of the media, controversial in previous Albanian elections and normally so in elections anywhere in the region, was not considered a real problem this time. Under close international scrutiny, television generally followed its legal obligations to provide equal and fair coverage to all parties, although some claimed there was slightly better coverage of the Democratic Party. Virtually all print media are tied to one political party or another, a fact well known to readers. As a result, voters could read the propaganda of their choice, or, if they were so inclined and could afford to do so, they could buy papers with opposing views and attempt to arrive at their own conclusion on what was really happening. Some difficulties in the distribution and circulation of newspapers were reported.

In the end, it was the pervasive fear that most detracted from the campaign period. The voting population may have already and emotionally made their political choices based on the collapse of the pyramid schemes, the subsequent rebellion, and how these developments affected them personally. On the other hand, many were also simply trying to survive under very difficult conditions, and were vulnerable to perceptions of who was stronger. In Vlora, for instance, rival gangs at least implicitly representing the opposing Democratic and Socialist Parties increased their fighting as election day approached, allegedly because whichever one appeared to have the upper hand could count on obtaining the votes of the local population. Even where gang activity was related to drug smuggling or other criminal activity, not politics, voters felt threatened and unable to view the elections beyond their immediate desire to obtain greater security.

The campaign generally focused on the larger question of Albania's future, with two very opposing scenarios presented by the ruling and opposition parties. The Democratic Party attempted to portray the Socialists as the unreformed Communists of the past, who would return the country to the dark days of Stalinist repression if elected. It also alleged the violent uprising to have been instigated by the Socialist Party and its allies. The Socialists, on the other hand, presented the Democratic Party as itself a repressor,

blaming it for the flawed elections of one year ago and the loss of savings in the collapsed pyramid schemes. Socialist Party leader Nano even went so far as to promise the return of lost savings if voted into power.

Despite their differences, the two leading and opposing parties appeared to share the desire to see the elections go forward, and to respect the results. Indeed, one week before election day, Democratic and Socialist Party leaders agreed on “A Pact for the Future of Albania,” in which they agreed that the elections were essential to the resolution of the country’s crisis, pledged to respect the results if the international community accepted them, and even recognized the need for a future government to be a coalition and for the opposition to hold institutional positions that gave it some checks on the ruling party. While this statement, made in Rome, may not have been able to counter difficult situations locally in Albania, it did at least place checks on opposing forces not to make matters worse depending on the election outcome.

ELECTION DAY

The hours in which the polls would be open on June 29 were not decided until the eve of the elections. Originally, they were to be open from 8:00 a.m. until 9:00 p.m. in accordance with the law, the lateness being justified to facilitate the ability of people without transportation and far from polling stations to vote. The lateness, however, caused major concerns for the safety of the polling committee members and observers, as well as for the security of the ballots. While consensus shifted toward an earlier closing, a decision to do so was blocked by procedural questions. It required decisions by the Constitutional Court and the Central Electoral Commission, with the support of the President. With the involvement of OSCE Personal Representative Vranitzky, these steps were finally taken, and the polls remained open from 7:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m.

The polling committees were tasked to arrive at their respective stations one hour before opening to ensure they had all the supplies they needed, and for the Chairman, Vice-Chairman and Secretary to each sign every ballot. Due to the need to erect voting booths, set up tables for the committee and seal ballot boxes, among other tasks, many committees could not practically sign all of the ballots in time, and many opened the stations and continued to sign ballots as time allowed during the course of the morning. Most seemed to have received their supplies, although some did not and many complained of their late arrival. There were few signs that polling committee members were being discriminated against according to party affiliation, or that any of them, on the basis of their party affiliation, were instructed or decided on their own to obstruct the proceedings. There was one major incident in Fier, however, when the brother of a polling committee’s vice-chairman, a Socialist, shot and killed the chairman of that committee, Burhan Misiri, a Democrat. The Democratic Party claimed that, in some southern zones, their representatives on the polling committees were intimidated or threatened. A domestic civic organization, the Society for Democratic Culture, was permitted to observe election day activities, and had approximately 1,400 people in the field doing so. Their voter education posters were also appropriately displayed at many polling stations.

Despite the difficulties in drawing up new registration lists of 2.065 million eligible voters, few problems with the lists appeared on election day. Voters who had mistakenly gone to the wrong polling station were the ones most frequently turned away. It is likely, however, that known Democratic Party supporters were kept off the lists in the south, but they were too afraid to appear to vote on election day. In Tirana, moreover, some problems were encountered by people not on the lists who did seek to vote. Helsinki Commission staff observed two young Albanians in Elbasan, who had just recently turned 18, being denied

the right to vote, despite having certificates entitling them to do so. After some questioning regarding proper procedures, both were soon allowed to vote. In the south, some problems were generated by Albanians currently residing in Greece who had returned to vote. Due to their absence, they were not placed on registration lists and could not vote, yet Greek authorities had stated that only persons with stamped passports indicating that they had voted would be allowed to return. This led to tension at some polling stations for those insisting on getting their passports stamped and to the stealing of station stamps after the polls closed for this purpose.

A greater challenge was the actual processing of voters. Most polling stations had between 600 and 1,000 registered voters, but many of these voters came to the polling stations during the morning hours, creating long lines. Police, sometimes uniformed but often not actually an officer but a locally hired armed guard, helped limit the number of people entering the polling station at any one time. Upon verifying a voter's eligibility by checking the registration list, a special invisible ink was to be applied to the left thumb to prevent double voting, and, of course, people's thumbs also had to be checked with a blacklight beforehand. In the rush to process voters, some had their thumbs checked and then were immediately sprayed, before their eligibility had been verified. The premature spraying could have inadvertently disenfranchised voters who were not registered to vote at that particular polling station. In addition, while proper documentation, such as a personal identification card or a passport, was always sought to verify the voter's identification, in some cases these documents were not stamped by the polling committee after they had voted.

Security was a major concern on election day. It was assumed that some groups might try to disrupt the election process with violence, and the daily criminal activity and gang rivalries held the prospects for interference. Foreign observers outside of Tirana were accompanied by escorts from the Multinational Protection Force, and Italy had deployed additional troops to assist in this effort. While protecting the foreign observers, the presence of the forces also contributed to a safer environment for everyone, and voters and polling committees alike seemed to appreciate their presence. On election day, one Italian soldier was seriously wounded in Vlora when shot in crossfire between gangs, which seemed unrelated to the fact that elections were taking place. It was, in fact, the first real MPF casualty, and it came only in the aftermath of such severe gang fighting that the MPF went beyond its mandate and intervened. Other than one incident in Elbasan, where a man was killed when he continued to shoot at Greek MPF units—after being warned to stop—because they would not buy drugs from him, the MPF was not challenged even by well-armed local gangs throughout the election period.

Police officers, or civilian armed guards, were present outside many polling stations, and did nothing to interfere with the voting. No armed person was technically permitted inside polling stations, but this was blatantly violated in some instances and hard to verify in others. In one polling station visited by Helsinki Commission staff in Elbasan, a polling committee member claimed that one unauthorized person present in the station was a local gang member and had a handgun. In other cases, some polling committee members were known to have been armed. Kalashnikov rifles were seen laying about in several polling stations.

The voters were generally informed on voting procedures, although there were difficulties. Family and group voting, typical in elections in countries of the region, remained pervasive. In response to criticism of the old Albanian tradition of crossing out the names of candidates or parties the voter did not want, the one that he or she desired now had to be selected using a check mark, or a plus or minus sign. This caused some confusion, and evidently led to many invalidated ballots. Some foreign observers also felt that the option of a plus or a minus sign might have caused confusion, as they meant the same in terms of marking

the ballot but normally are viewed as opposites of each other. Some observers also felt that having two votes on one ballot, one for a candidate and another for a party, might have been more confusing for voters than having two separate ballots. The second ballot given to the voters, regarding the referendum, was clearer; the voters had to choose between a republic or a monarchy. Monarchy supporters, however, claimed the “plus” and “minus” signs invalidated a particularly high number of ballots cast in their favor, as voters used both to indicate their choice for one and against the other.

Private cars with Socialist Party banners were seen by one Helsinki Commission staffer noisily driving through the streets of Saranda on election day. In addition, one polling committee member was overheard claiming that some ballots had been stolen, about 30 in all, returned and placed in the ballot box. Elsewhere there were reports of some double voting. Gangs were reported in Durres and elsewhere to have visited polling stations during the last hour of voting and, in some cases, to have taken materials or filled out ballots on their own. In Gjirokaster, two men were reported to have fired shots at ballot boxes in one polling station.

At 6:00 p.m., the polls closed, and the period of counting began. Due to the problems experienced in the previous year’s election, the counting procedure was very specifically described to polling committees in their manuals. The widest possible observer coverage of the count was also desired, despite the increased security risk that accompanied the evening and nighttime hours. Polling committee members generally followed the procedures for counting adequately. When they did not, it was nevertheless by the general consensus of the group, and the proper results were likely still recorded.

In some cases, however, major problems in the counting were reported. For example, in one polling station observed by the Helsinki Commission in Elbasan, the proper procedures were overlooked and the Democratic Party Chairman of the committee did not involve himself in the count. As the piles of ballots for each candidate were not stacking up favorably for the Democratic Party, the chairman proclaimed that “this baby is sick,” and left the station. He returned sometime later in an attempt to convince the other polling committee members to abandon the counting effort. They struggled on, at one point with the police officer coming inside the station to assist them in counting ballots, and the chairman left for good. As shooting and explosions increased just outside the polling station, their hurried effort to finish led to additional problems with the procedures they were using, although their results were likely accurate in that they coincided with those of a nearby polling station which had followed proper procedures.

Another Helsinki Commission observer noted that poor security in the south deterred entire polling committees from accompanying ballots and the protocols on which the results were tabulated to the zonal commissions. Such experiences led some observers to conclude, that, while the count was probably sufficiently accurate, it would have been preferable, for security and improved accuracy, for polling committees to have delivered their ballots and registration lists to zonal commissions for counting immediately after closing the polls.

In one zone in Saranda, the fear of polling committees to accompany the protocols and materials to the zonal commission became a major problem, because rival gang leaders were both running as candidates. One polling station, in fact, was reported to have been burned down. After a threatened zonal commission chairman received instructions from Tirana, it was agreed immediately to reconcile the entire count at the zonal commission in the presence of everyone. Near Fier, parties dissatisfied with the results at one polling station reportedly negotiated new numbers and put them, not the actual results, on the protocol.

In many cases, security conditions were so poor that foreign observers were pulled out of polling stations before the counting had been completed.

Observation of the tabulation of the polling committee results at zonal commissions indicated that, with the exception of specific incidents like those already mentioned, the ballots and protocols had arrived safely and were not subjected to tampering during the night.

Thirty-four seats were not decided in the first round or had to be re-run, and the respective zones held elections one week later, on July 6. Rallies were held in between, mostly peacefully, although one by monarchist supporters claiming fraud in the referendum resulted in violence. Turnout was lower on the second-round election day, and fewer problems were reported, although another polling committee member, this time a Socialist, was shot and killed in Shkoder on election day when a man entered the polling station and fired at the entire panel. Police responded to armed people at polling stations in Kavaje and Kruje, although no shooting was reported.

Seats based on voting in two zones, one in Puke and the other in Fier, remained to be decided the week after the second round. First-round irregularities forced them to have a new first round, and the lack of a clear winner forced them to go to a second round

THE RESULTS

Seventy-three percent of registered voters participated in the June 29 elections. Turnout was much lower on July 6. The possibility that some Democratic Party supporters were not on the voter registration lists could mean a lower actual turnout than the statistics indicate.

The results show a surprisingly large win for the opposition Socialist Party, which, together with its allies, achieved a two-thirds parliamentary majority enabling constitutional changes. The results are:

<u>Party</u>	<u>Zone Seats</u>	<u>Proportional Seats</u>	<u>Total Seats</u>
Socialist Party	79	22	101
Social Democratic Party	7	1	8
Union for Human Rights	3	1	4
Democratic Alliance	1	1	2
Agrarian Party	1	0	1
National Unity Party	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>
Total Center-Left	92	25	117
Democratic Party	16	11	27
Unity of the Right	2	0	2
Republican Party	1	1	2
Legality Party	0	2	2
Christian Democratic Party	1	0	1
National Front	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>1</u>
Total Center-Right	20	15	35
<u>Independents</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>--</u>	<u>3</u>
Totals	115	40	155

For comparison, the results of the 1991, 1992, 1996 and 1997 parliamentary elections were:

<u>Party</u>	<u>1991 Seats</u>	<u>1992 Seats</u>	<u>1996 Seats</u>	<u>1997 Seats</u>
Socialist Party (Party of Labor)	169 (67.6%)	38 (27.1%)	9 (6.4%)	101 (65.2%)
Democratic Party	75 (30.0%)	92 (65.7%)	122 (87.1%)	27 (17.4%)
Social Democratic Party	0	7	0	8
Union for Human Rights (Omonia)	5	2	3	4
Republican Party	0	1	3	2
Unity of the Right	0	0	0	2
Legality Party	0	0	0	2
Democratic Alliance	0	0	0	2
Agrarian Party	0	0	0	1
Christian Democratic Party	0	0	0	1
National Front	0	0	2	1
National Unity Party	0	0	0	1
Committee of Veterans	1	0	0	0
<u>Independents</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>3</u>
Totals	250	140	140	155

These results show that Albanian voters overwhelmingly vote for either the Socialist or Democratic Parties. Greater diversity has only come with the 1997 elections. In addition, the voters give the favored party at the time a two-thirds majority or close to it; no results are mixed. However, neither the Socialist Party nor the Democratic Party were able to govern for more than one year following their respective 1991 and 1996 two-thirds majorities, in both cases due to social unrest. Whether such a trend will continue following the 1997 elections depends primarily on what lessons current political leaders have learned from this past experience.

In the referendum on Albania remaining a republic or becoming a constitutional monarchy, 66.74 percent of the voters opted for keeping the republic. However, Leka and his followers claimed that the referendum passed and that fraud had taken place, causing a confrontation with the Socialist Party victors. Even if only one-third had voted for the monarchy, that result exceeded expectations and indicated that many voters were frustrated by all political leaders and simply sought some change.

POST-ELECTION DEVELOPMENTS

On the day after the first round, the Socialist victory was already evident. The only question remaining was how large the victory would be, whether some key Democratic Party leaders would win seats in run-offs the following Sunday, and how smoothly the transfer of power would be. President Sali Berisha spoke on national television Monday evening and noted that “Albanian electors seemed to have voted for the Democratic Party to be in the opposition.” He called on his supporters to treat the results “with dignity,” and to continue to work for the development of a democratic Albania. Both he and Prime Minister Bashkim Fino, who immediately followed him on the airwaves, thanked the international community for its support in making the election a success. In a press conference, Socialist Party Chairman Fatos

Nano sounded conciliatory. He stressed that he would help, but not force, the President to live up to his promise to resign if the Democratic Party was defeated, and even suggested a meeting in which they would shake hands. Berisha indicated his intention to step down by indicating that “cohabitation” with a leftist government was impossible, but he did not specify when.

Following the second round, Fatos Nano announced that a new government would be formed by July 25. Reports indicate he would become the new Prime Minister, with Bashkim Fino remaining in the government as Deputy Prime Minister, and that Socialist Party Secretary General, Rexhep Mejdani, would be nominated as the new President. Skender Gjinushi, head of the Social Democratic Party, was chosen to become the next Speaker of Parliament, replacing former political prisoner Pjeter Arbnori, who held that position since 1992. Reformers within the Socialist Party reportedly have complained that hard-liners were getting most of the ministerial positions.

Soon after the second round, Italy also announced that the MPF would withdraw from the country completely by August 12 “if there are no complications,” raising some concern by Albanians that their departure was premature. Subsequent statements, however, indicate a willingness to reconsider the decision.

CONCLUSION

The final report of the OSCE Special Coordinator for Certification deemed the elections to have been “acceptable given the prevailing circumstances. They should constitute the foundations for a strong, democratic system that the Albanians want and deserve.”

Taken as a whole, the election results likely do reflect the will of the people of Albania at this time, and it is imperative that all parties in Albania accept the results whether they like them or not. However, caution needs to be attached to any conclusion that these elections give the final say on Albania’s political future. The views of the Albanian populace are based very much on emotion, particularly in light of the severe financial losses and violence which have occurred, and are subject to extreme and quick changes, even without manipulation. While the 1996 elections were irregular, for example, the landslide victory for the Democratic Party may nevertheless have represented the general will of the people at the time.

In addition, had the Democratic Party been the winner in these elections, it is not so certain that the many irregularities which occurred would have allowed the certification still to consider the election “acceptable.” While one OSCE official asserted that irregularities balanced themselves out in regard to which party they hurt, in fact the Democratic Party was effectively prohibited from running in the southern part of the country. The best spin that could be placed on such a development is that the prohibition, due to threats by the local “salvation committees” and armed gangs, in a sense reflected the will of the people living there by means other than the ballot box.

This raises questions regarding the wisdom of holding elections in Albania so soon. They probably were essential for bringing greater stability to the country. However, while it would not be wise to call for new elections in the near future, Albania’s leaders and the international community both need to recognize that additional stability will necessitate additional change. Resisting such change, even in the form of new elections in the next few years, could in fact be destabilizing.

There is also a trend—which began with the September 1996 elections in Bosnia-Herzegovina, developed in the April 1997 Eastern Slavonian elections in Croatia and culminated in these Albanian

elections—to compromise international standards for free and fair elections for the sake of timely elections that allegedly produce stability. While the international community grappled with the question of how free and fair elections could be in Bosnia-Herzegovina, from the beginning it was acknowledged that they would not be free and fair in Albania. Success was determined by simply having elections take place without major disruption. Genuinely successful elections, however, are more than their proper administration. They need the proper environment for debate and for making choices without fear of retribution. Granted, creating such an environment, or even something close to it, can be difficult. At a certain point, however, the absence of proper conditions for elections undermines the result, and can produce more instability instead.

That said, the Albanian authorities and the international community deserve substantial credit for being able to have elections at all, and for them to be as good as they were in such a short period of time. To many outsiders, the situation appeared completely hopeless, and many dedicated persons, especially in the OSCE and the Multinational Protection Force, contributed to an effort which may, in fact, have kept it from actually being completely hopeless.

It remains to be seen how the new Socialist majority will govern Albania. On the one hand, there could be retribution for the retribution in which the Democratic Party engaged for the years of Communist repression. On the other hand, there may have been enough change in Albania since 1992, and enough concern over Socialist intentions to provide checks on the majority, so that consensus can replace polarization as the main feature of Albanian politics. Such a positive result will not come easily, however, and international involvement in mediating between opposing sides will remain a necessity. This is especially the case if the Socialist Party, having obtained a powerful two-thirds majority, is, in fact, increasingly under the sway of its hard-line members at the expense of moderate reformers. Nano's ability to return pyramid-scheme losses, and his response to protests if he cannot, will likely be the first real test of the Socialist Party's capacity to govern the country.

Albania's new leadership and the international community must, however, decide immediately how to improve security by bringing gang activity under control and respond to the economic dimension of the country's crisis. Without continued efforts on these fronts, democratic development in Albania will certainly remain on hold. Assistance in building democratic institutions, especially in regard to a new constitution, the judiciary, law enforcement and the media, should also be resumed when security for such activity is enhanced. Albania's citizens can likely find some comfort in the fact that their country's neighbors, and more distant countries like the United States, are sufficiently concerned about their plight to remain actively engaged, including through the work of the OSCE.