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ALBANIA'S LOCAL ELECTIONS: A TEST OF STABILITY AND DEMOCRACY

I. INTRODUCTION

Local elections in Albania on 1 October 2000 will mark the first test of popular support for the ruling Socialist-led coalition since it came to power following the violent uprising in 1997.¹ The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), whose Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) will be leading the monitoring effort, deems these elections to be of critical importance. Albania's electoral process has traditionally been bedevilled by the same handicaps encountered in most other institutional areas: namely, inadequate legislation, capacity deficiencies, politicisation of the process, and lack of all round political support. It is vitally important for Albania's democracy and international reputation that this year's elections do not repeat the mistakes of the recent past.²

There is, however, growing concern about political tension in the run-up to the elections, due to increasing political polarisation and the threat of non-participation by the main opposition party. Despite calls from international organisations to avoid extreme confrontation, the country's two main parties – the governing Socialist Party (SP) chaired by former premier, Fatos Nano, and the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) led by former president, Sali Berisha – have opened the debate with characteristically bitter polemics. Three years after he was forced from power in July 1997 in an armed rebellion in which more than 2,000 people were killed, Berisha, now 53, is back on the electoral campaign trail. Since losing power, he has waged a relentless campaign against his Socialist opponents, whom he accuses of rampant corruption, and has repeatedly called for early parliamentary elections.³ The last local elections were in October 1996 and resulted in a sweeping victory for Berisha's Democratic Party. As a result, the DP dominates local government with 80 per cent control over city and district councils and therefore has the most to lose in the polls. In a remark that reveals the importance of the elections for the DP, Berisha claims the poll will be "the most contested elections in the history of Albania because the government has demonstrated that it drew up the law to manipulate them."⁴

¹ A further round of voting on 15 October will take place for candidates who fail to win a majority in the first round.

² Ambassador Geert Ahrens, Head of OSCE Presence in Albania, "Democratisation and Institution Building in Albania," Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 4 May 2000.

³ Parliamentary elections are officially scheduled for June 2001.

⁴ Reuters, 13 May 2000, 13:58.

A Council of Europe (CoE) resolution at the end of June declared that "the holding of elections in conformity with the new electoral law, in order for them to be fair and for their outcome to be acceptable to all the political parties, is a condition that Albania must meet, given all the promises made before it was accepted into the CoE in July 1995." This is as much a reference to Berisha as it is to the current government since it was under Berisha's administration that Albania joined the CoE. The persistence of polarisation and confrontation in Albanian political life is manifested by deep divisions within both major parties. The Socialists are divided between supporters of SP chairman Fatos Nano, and the younger element centred around Premier Ilir Meta and former premier Pandeli Majko. Whilst the Socialists are trying to paper over the cracks in order to present a united front to the electorate, the Democrat leadership has basically ignored its breakaway reformist faction, the Democratic Reform Movement (DPRM), now generally referred to as the "Young Reformers." Both main parties also have problems with their coalition partners. The outcome of the elections is likely to be very close between the two major parties and the results are almost certain to be contested.

Despite persistent threats to boycott the entire procedure, the Democrats will most probably take part in the elections but continue to boycott the Central Election Committee (CEC) and not recognise the results announced by the CEC because they believe it is biased in favour of the Socialists. The conduct of the elections and the willingness of the main parties to abide by their outcome will be seen as a measure of the level of political maturity Albania has reached and a valuable indicator that the country is progressing in the right direction. A successful electoral process would enhance regional stability and advance Albania's candidacy for increased integration into European structures. A serious monitoring effort by NGOs and OSCE governments would raise the prospects for a democratic outcome.

II. BACKGROUND TO THE ELECTORAL PREPARATIONS

So far, the whole electoral process has been very problematic. The OSCE has endeavoured to accommodate criticisms of the electoral code through a working group – chaired by Ambassador Geert Ahrens, Head of the OSCE Presence in Albania, or his Legal Counsellor – and open to all parties to deal with technical and legislative issues of voter registration and the enactment of the electoral code. Since the beginning of March 2000, the working group has met on an almost daily basis, discussing issues of a legal or technical nature raised by participants. As a result, by mid-April, an amended draft code had been prepared incorporating the changes agreed to by the parties, together with the proposals of international experts. In the view of the OSCE and the international experts on the working group, this text should provide Albania with an internationally acceptable legal basis for the holding of free and fair elections. The Albanian constitution provides for an independent, non-political Central Electoral Commission (CEC), excluding the nomination or participation of members on a party political basis. The constitution also entitles President Rexhep Meidani to appoint two CEC members, while the High Council of Justice, chaired by the president, can elect three commission members. The other two are elected by parliament.

Opposition Arguments against the Electoral Procedures

Towards the end of last year it became apparent that the opposition planned to attack the proposed arrangements for holding the elections – complaining that they had been inadequately involved in the preparatory process and strongly criticising the constitution of the CEC.⁵ Complicating the picture was the legacy of the OSCE's criticism of the conduct of the 1996 general election, which had incited Berisha's anger and led him to accuse the organisation of a leftist bias and of being under the control of communists.

As in 1996, dissent revolves around the composition of the electoral commission. Opposition parties accuse President Meidani of turning the CEC into a politically partisan body in order to assist the Socialist Party in rigging the elections. The DP would prefer the CEC to be reconfigured, with one representative from each of the seven parties who won the most votes in the 1997 general election. Of the seven parties, three might be considered right wing and four left wing. By permitting a representative of each to serve on the CEC, the DP argues, there would be a fairer balance between left and right. However, the composition of the CEC is not within the scope of the technical and legal tasks of the OSCE's working group.

Njazi Kosovrasti, head of the DP's Local Government Department, explained his party's opposition to the CEC: “[President] Meidani appointed two independents, cronies of his, and three others were appointed by the High Council of Justice, which is also headed by Meidani. Another was appointed by parliament. These six were appointed prior to the electoral code being passed by parliament on 12 May 2000. Two appointees resigned so there remained three empty places. Both parties' experts signed the electoral code agreeing that five out of seven [members] should agree to any appointment in order that it be legal. Parliament, however, refused to agree. The only possible reason, therefore, is to rig the votes.”⁶

According to a DP memorandum, the electoral code was approved “only by the vote of the leftist forces, without taking into consideration some amendments that aimed at respecting the previous political agreements presented by other deputies.” In the view of the opposition, the basis of the local electoral law should be that which stood at the time of the 1996 local elections, which produced a landslide victory for the DP. The present code, the DP argues, creates a legal foundation for manipulating the elections and the CEC is invalid since five CEC members were nominated in a one-sided manner, before the code had been even approved and with disregard for the criteria laid down in the code, resulting in a commission that does not enjoy the trust of other political forces participating in the elections.⁷

An example of the difficulty of ensuring the neutrality of representation between the ruling coalition and the opposition occurred in mid-June 2000, when Fotaq Nano was appointed chairman of the Central Electoral Commission. The appointment outraged DP supporters, who claimed that not only is Fotaq Nano a relative of Socialist Party leader Fatos Nano and a close friend of President Rexhep Meidani, he is also a former Socialist

⁵ OSCE press statement on the elections by Ambassador Geert Ahrens, 10 April 2000.

⁶ ICG interview with Njazi Kosovrasti, Head of DP Local Government Department, DP headquarters, Tirana, June 2000.

⁷ Memorandum of the DP deputies asking various international bodies, including the US Secretary of State, OSCE President, and EU Foreign Ministers, to intervene to resolve the Electoral Code issue. Tirana, June 2000.

member of previous central electoral commissions. "So much for impartiality," was the resounding response to news of the appointment from DP activists.⁸ Njazi Kosovrasti argued that by appointing a relative of Nano, the Socialists had been arrogantly provocative.⁹

Fotaq Nano had been elected by five fellow members to chair the commission. This left parliament to elect the seventh member, which the Socialist parliamentary majority agreed should be proposed by the DP. The DP, however, refused to participate in the process. Instead, they called for a new electoral code, which would give both the Socialist and Democratic parties, as the country's two major parties, equal rights to elect CEC members. In what the Socialists deemed as a compromise, it was agreed to appoint a seventh member of the CEC from the right-wing grouping. Not recognising the electoral code or the composition of the CEC, the DP refused to propose any candidates. The impasse ended with the election of Gjergj Koka as the seventh member of the CEC. Koka was proposed by Nexhat Kalaj, a lawyer and representative of the United Right of Shkoder, who expressed in his proposal a strong desire to break the deadlock and open the way to fair elections. Kalaj made it clear that this was a personal undertaking, free from engagement to any party or political grouping.¹⁰ This development is an indication of the growing impatience from both the left and the right at the DP's wavering stance regarding the elections. The leader of the Christian Democrats, Zef Bushati, advised the party to either accept the electoral code and the CEC and participate in the local elections, or boycott them entirely.¹¹

The Municipal Division of Tirana

In August, Parliament swiftly approved a law that proposes to divide Tirana into eleven municipalities. This controversial plan has been opposed by the Council of Europe, which argues that there is not enough time to implement the changes before the October elections. The opposition accuses the Socialists of attempting to gerrymander districts to increase their party's prospects in the local elections and insist that, under Albania's constitution, a local referendum is needed for such changes. Although similar administrative changes have been proposed for the entire country, the main controversy centres on the changes envisaged for the capital, which has been a bastion of the DP since the end of the one-party state in 1991. Tirana's vast sprawling suburbs are home to recent arrivals from the north, who are traditionally DP supporters likely to re-elect a DP mayor.¹² The Democrats argue that the changes are designed to minimise the risk of heavy Socialist losses in Tirana.

However, Minister of Local Government Bashkim Fino, who proposed the reforms in the first place, claims they are intended to improve overall management of the city, whose population has risen sharply from 290,000 in 1990 to an estimated 700,000 by 1999. Fino said Tirana's division from a centralised city hall into eleven municipalities would

⁸ ICG interviews with DP supporters and activists, Tirana/Durres, June 2000.

⁹ ICG interview with Njazi Kosovrasti, Tirana, June 2000.

¹⁰ *Zeri-I-Popullit*, 27 July 2000.

¹¹ *Albania Daily News*, 23 June 2000.

¹² Tirana's current mayor, Albert Brojka is a Democrat. A new DP candidate is to be named by a party conference at the end of August. The 35-year-old Culture Minister, Edi Rama, was officially nominated on 1 August as the SP's candidate for mayor of Tirana, although Rama is not a member of the SP.

give more autonomy to local government. He added that the move was in line with the charter on local autonomy from the CoE that Albania had signed.¹³

III. THE SOCIALIST PARTY

The Socialist Party, aiming to win control of at least half of local councils, have adopted the campaign slogans, "Tomorrow Will Be Better," and "Vote for Your Freedom, Future and Property." Given the dire social conditions that a substantial proportion of the population living outside the capital endure, these slogans will not be easy to market. The Socialists will seek to take political credit for achievements since the present government came to power in 1997. According to one prominent Socialist, law and order has been restored throughout much of the country, and the state is now functioning in places where there was no state control whatsoever during the past few years.¹⁴ In mid-July, an IMF team announced that Albania was on track to achieve 7 per cent economic growth this year and had made significant progress in structural reforms. The country recorded two strong growth rates over the past two years signalling a swift recovery from the total economic collapse following the crisis of 1997. The economy is forecast to grow at around 5 per cent annually over the next two years.¹⁵

Nevertheless, ordinary people may only be partially aware of such social and economic achievements. What they notice, and what concerns them most is the lack of jobs, low paid salaries and pensions, inadequate water and electricity supplies, unmaintained roads and sporadic refuse collection. During their three years of government, the Socialists have failed to ensure adequate and reliable supplies of daily essentials. In their defence, the Socialists argue that since most local government, including Tirana city hall, is in the hands of the DP, civic duties remain largely unfulfilled with the explicit political aim of undermining the national government's achievements. A leading SP figure, Dritero Agoli, recently lashed out at local government officials, most of whom are DP members, for their failure to use the funds given by the central government and, according to him, for creating the impression that the Socialists were not working efficiently nor keeping their election promises.¹⁶

Although the Socialists currently control more than two thirds of parliament, within the ruling party there is a good deal of infighting. Socialist Party Chairman Fatos Nano is under threat from increasing rank and file support for Premier Ilir Meta, and to a lesser degree former premier Pandeli Majko.¹⁷ Throughout the country in June, a series of conferences saw pro-Meta candidates elected as leaders of local SP branches at the expense of pro-Nano candidates. In the capital, anti-Nano Socialist leader Musa Ulgini was elected chairman of the SP branch. In discussions, Socialist supporters argue that Meta is widely regarded as a competent head of government and that Nano's position is weakening.¹⁸ Some members within the Socialist Party's district branches are also

¹³ *Albania Daily News*, 28 July 2000.

¹⁴ ICG interview with Arta Dade, International Secretary, Socialist Party headquarters, Tirana, June 2000.

¹⁵ *Albania Daily News*, 15 July 2000.

¹⁶ *Zeri-I-Popullit*, 30 June 2000.

¹⁷ Meta was elected to his post last year after two groupings - his and another one supporting then-premier Pandeli Majko - allied against Nano followers. Ilir Meta was seen as positioned between the two larger groupings, and his candidacy was considered a compromise.

¹⁸ ICG discussions with Socialist Party members, Tirana, June 2000.

displeased with the behaviour of Socialist Party chairman Nano, and other prominent SP leaders, for not respecting grass roots Socialists' votes and opinions.

In many respects it can be argued that aside from his personal conflicts within the SP, Nano is being held hostage by the continuing presence of Berisha. Along with the DP leader, Nano is associated in people's consciousness with the fear and uncertainties of the past few years. Nevertheless, in the short term the strongest card of the SP remains the Berisha one. The Socialists are without doubt benefiting from the divisions within the DP, and from Berisha's growing international isolation. The last electoral victory of the Socialists in 1997 was based largely on wide scale public dissatisfaction with Berisha. However, in the run up to the elections there has been a strong call for a reunification within the party, which must be jointly spearheaded by Nano, Meta and Majko. The SP congress held at the end of June 2000 was an attempt to make the SP more democratic and European-oriented, which many rank-and-file members see as the best possible way to defeat the Democrats. The Socialists are concentrating much of their effort in rural areas where Berisha has also been campaigning recently, and where they received most of their support in the 1991 and 1992 elections.

Chairman of the SP elections committee Kastriot Islami has recently inveighed against complacency within the Party, reminding party members that if the SP and the government do not step up their work, the DP would continue to hold on to local power. He warned of a moral crisis, an absence of principles and the creation of clans on the basis of interests of various kinds. Indeed within both the major parties clans have emerged whose members' primary aim is furthering their own personal and family interests. In what could be termed a wake-up call, Islami argued that since coming to power the SP has lost its leading qualities at all levels, and its government is composed mostly of mediocre officials. He also noted that as preparations got underway for the forthcoming local elections, "many of its leaders are euphoric, which is baseless. There is a desire to win but there is also a gap between the wish and the systematic work required to make this wish a reality."¹⁹

The recent hasty political manoeuvring and policy decisions, however, suggest a lack of confidence rather than complacency. On 5 July 2000, Premier Meta announced a government reshuffle – replacing three ministers in a bid to give, in the words of a government spokesman, "a new impulse to the government's work." The changes were carried out in such haste that neither the presidency nor the Socialists' coalition partners were invited to discuss them. In an attempt to keep the Democratic Alliance Party (PAD) in the governing coalition, the party was given the portfolio of justice minister instead of the less important ministry of public works. However, this was not enough to placate the coalition. The SP has been increasingly accused of patronising its junior coalition partners.²⁰ On 26 July the Socialists began the first round of negotiations on power sharing with their junior partners. In round-up meetings with the Social Democrats (PSD) and the Greek minority Union for Human Rights (PBDNJ), chairman Fatos Nano and his election staff discussed strongholds for their party allies. Social Democratic Party (PSD) leader Skender Gjinushi told reporters that he expected to join forces with the

¹⁹ *Koha Jone*, 19 June 2000.

²⁰ ICG discussions with members of the Democratic Alliance and Agrarian parties, Tirana, June 2000.

Socialists in October's elections "for a united front of centre-left forces."²¹ Only days later, however, he announced that his party's pre-election coalition with the Socialists was dead.²² This followed the Socialist Party's publication of a list of its own candidates for all municipalities and communes. The PSD will, therefore, have to field its own candidates rather than negotiate a joint list with the SP as planned earlier. The Socialists justified their decision that the coalition parties present their candidates separately as a test of the electoral support that each party has amongst the electorate.

The Democratic Alliance (PAD), which is at odds with the Socialists after the sacking of two of its ministers, said it would participate separately in the local elections. In an interview with the daily *Shekulli*, the PAD's Secretary General, Ridvan Peshkepja said the proposals made by the SP not to leave any free electoral zones to its allies but to present joint candidates are outside its concerns. Peshkepja criticised the Socialists for wasting time making such statements because his party does not view the SP as its master. For Peshkepja, some of his party's candidates are skilled enough to win the elections and compete effectively with the Democratic Party and the Socialist candidates.²³ Meanwhile, the leader of the PBDNJ, Vasil Melo, said he expected a trade off with the Socialists in municipalities where each would run uncontested. The PBDNJ is ready to make deals with the SP but is against joint candidates, said Melo, who thought the Socialists had become more self-confident than they were in the elections of 1997. Melo did not exclude abandoning all co-operation with the SP if the Socialists refused to compromise with its partners in the Alliance for the State, pointing out that the present situation is vastly different from that of 1997 when the country was in complete turmoil.²⁴

IV. THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

The Democratic Party's campaign is very much centred around its leader Sali Berisha, who has been holding rallies throughout the country announcing that he is back on the political scene. Berisha, however, has a serious image problem. His name is synonymous not only with the dark years of 1997 and 1998, but also with what many Albanians feel is the root cause of the paralysis in Albanian politics - the "communist mentality" that prevails amongst the country's political leadership. Obviously, this also applies to those older members of the Socialist Party, the successor to the communist Party of Labour. But many top DP officials, including Berisha, have tried unsuccessfully to disguise their own communist past. In reality, the whole evolution of the Democratic Party has been closely linked to that political tradition. The DP leader is still considered by many as an authoritarian, provocative and inflammatory politician, who survives only through the conflicts he provokes.

Just as the people's support for the Socialists in 1997 was, to a large extent, a vote against the authoritarianism of Berisha rather than for any specific policies the Socialists had to offer, Berisha's campaign is an appeal to protest against the current government rather than for an attempt to mobilise support for any specific DP policies. Berisha's intolerant and dismissive attitude towards the reformist wing of his own party is

²¹ *Albania Daily News*, 27 July, 2000.

²² *Shekulli*, 1 August 2000.

²³ *Shekulli*, 24 July 2000.

²⁴ *Albania Daily News*, 25 July 2000.

indicative of his style of leadership. In an interview with the daily *Gazeta Shqiptare*, Deputy Minister of Local Government Blendi Klosi claimed that many local officials – who were often moderate DP members – were ready to co-operate with Socialist-run central institutions, but were afraid of Berisha's reaction.²⁵ The position of the moderates within the DP thus remains difficult, having been completely excluded from the offices they previously held within the DP.

A recent European Democratic Union fact-finding mission to Albania concluded that Berisha had failed to establish himself as an opposition leader ready to work through the framework of legal and parliamentary institutions. He has continued to favour boycotts of parliament, confrontational rhetoric, and demonstrations on the streets. Part of the "Young Reformers" platform is the demand that the DP should adopt a more "constitutional" approach to politics.²⁶ Mainstream Democrats have persistently snubbed efforts of cooperation made by the reformists led by Gence Pollo. On 1 August 2000, Pollo told the independent daily *Shekulli* that the reformers would submit a list of candidates for mayors in some municipalities "in the hope of securing a significant victory for the Democrats and the entire opposition."²⁷ It is unlikely, however, that the DP leadership will even acknowledge the list. The reformists have not ruled out putting forward independent candidates after their proposals for names of potential candidates were rejected out of hand by DP headquarters. The political allies of the DP in the Union for Democracy Alliance tend to have an extreme and "conspiratorial" understanding of the political situation in Albania. For them, the clash between Berisha and the reformers results from infiltration of the DP by the communist secret police. Whatever influence these parties have on the DP will tend to reinforce Berisha's hard-line stance.²⁸

The DP daily, *Rilindja Demokratike*, asserts that the DP was excluded from the June 1997 general elections because it was being attacked by criminal gangs in two thirds of the country, and was excluded again in the November 1998 constitutional referendum.²⁹ In 1997, there were 35 districts that could not be contested by the DP because they had no representation and could not canvas in the south.³⁰ In interviews, the majority of DP activists express confidence that the situation has changed and they are headed to electoral victory. DP Head of Public Relations Gjerji Thanasi believes that, "If they [the Socialists] win the local elections there will be hell here. I am totally convinced that the DP will win the elections."³¹ Chairman of the DP parliamentary group Jemin Gjani told reporters that, "I have the strong conviction that the DP and the entire right-wing forces will win the local elections because the experience of the period 1992-1996, when the DP was in power is testimony to the fact that it is a political force which has governed much better than the present [Socialist] government."³² On 21 July 2000, at a meeting with deputy chairmen from local DP branches, Berisha warned that he could come to power in three hours if he wanted, but his party would, nevertheless, abide by the principle of the free ballot. Such statements, coming less than two years after the

²⁵ *Gazeta Shqiptare*, 12 May 2000.

²⁶ Report of the European Democratic Union fact-finding visit to Albania, 3-4 February 2000.

²⁷ *Shekulli*, 1 August, 2000.

²⁸ Report of the European Democratic Union fact-finding visit to Albania, 3-4 February 2000.

²⁹ *Rilindja Demokratike*, 12 June 2000.

³⁰ ICG interview with Gjerji Thanasi, DP head of public relations, Tirana, June 2000.

³¹ ICG interview with Gjerji Thanasi, Tirana, and with DP supporters in Tirana and Durres, June 2000.

³² *Albania Daily News*, 24 June 2000.

abortive coup d'etat in September 1998, cause concern amongst the Albanian public, and may well promote a Socialist victory.

Berisha, however, can no longer rely upon the support of large swathes of the north. His support nowadays is far more localised in central lowland districts such as Tirana, Durres, Kavaje and Mamurras, together with the little maverick village of Lazarat in the deep south. What Berisha does have is a hard core of very determined supporters, many of whom genuinely believe that the international community, most notably the OSCE, is actively working to ensure a Socialist victory. When asked what would happen if the Socialists won the local elections, a spokesman in a group of DP supporters in Durres said, "If they steal these elections from us, God save Albania."³³ It must be hoped that this is just empty rhetoric. If it is not, and serious problems do occur, they are likely to be centred in Tirana or Durres. It now appears that, with the exception of the Christian Democratic Party (CDP), the DP, unlike the Socialists, has managed to maintain their coalition partnerships and will participate in the local elections alongside its allies the Union for Democracy (UfD).

On the international front, playing the national card, Berisha has recently promised to take a tougher stance over the property claims of Muslim Albanians, or Chams, who were deported from Greece after the First and Second World Wars.³⁴ During a recent ceremony which renamed a street in Tirana *Chameria* after the Thesprotia region of northern Greece (Chameria in Albanian) from where the Chams were expelled, Berisha told the crowd of Chams, "I pledge that I will be tough on Greece on this stance when I get back in power. I will do the utmost to make Greece recognise the property and resettlement rights for those deported." While this might help Berisha to burnish his nationalist credentials, it has to be asked whether the powerful Albanian Diaspora may in fact be more effective at assisting the Chams.

Berisha is still smarting from the humiliating rebuff he received from Kosovo's UN administrator, Bernard Kouchner, who in mid-June prevented Berisha from visiting Kosovo, citing the tense security situation as the cause. The actual reason, though, for barring Berisha was the plausible concern that he might aggravate the already tense pre-election atmosphere in Kosovo by calling for independence and siding openly with specific Kosovar political factions. Berisha was advised to reschedule his visit when the situation had calmed.³⁵ Aware that a number of other prominent Albanians, including President Meidani and former premier Pandeli Majko, have visited Kosovo – albeit in a private rather than political capacity – an infuriated Berisha told a press conference that the refusal to allow him to enter Kosovo resulted from "mean arbitrariness and plots by the Tirana authorities and certain sectors of UNMIK."³⁶

Berisha's supporters remain angry over Kouchner's decision, citing it as proof that the international community still wishes to keep Albanians divided. They argue the move has enhanced Berisha's prestige by proving how important a figure the international community believes Berisha is, otherwise he would have been allowed in. "They [UNMIK

³³ ICG discussions with DP supporters, Durres, June 2000.

³⁴ For an analysis of the Cham issue see *Albania: State of the Nation*, ICG Balkans Report No. 87, 1 March 2000.

³⁵ For similar reasons the UN and other international organisations, as well as former KLA leader Hashim Thaci, also advised Fatos Nano not to visit Kosovo.

³⁶ Sali Berisha, District Office, Kukës, 14 June 2000.

and the OSCE] are afraid of the power of Berisha and the support he has in Kosovo," said a number of DP supporters in Albania.³⁷ The DP leader is arguably more popular in Kosovo – where in several southern Kosovo towns, crowds had gathered to await his arrival – than in Albania, having urged the Kosovars not to sign the Rambouillet agreement and given his full support for Kosovo's independence. Kosovars are, on the whole, unaware of Berisha's political legacy or the causes and consequences of the 1997 rebellion.

The event has fuelled growing dissatisfaction, evident across the right-wing spectrum in both Kosovo and Albania, at the meddling of the international community in the affairs of Albanians. The visit cancellation provoked a hostile media campaign in Kosovo, questioning international administration's right to restrict an Albanian's freedom of movement. Back in Tirana, Berisha said he would visit Kosovo when it has its own president and prime minister – a clear indication that he thinks it time for Kouchner and his fellow international officials to leave.³⁸ Many Albanians believe that it is time for the international community to leave Kosovo. The DP press employs the word "temporary" whenever referring to the international authorities in Kosovo.³⁹

Nevertheless, contrary to what his supporters believe, the annulment of the visit was a severe blow to the political image of the DP leader and has without doubt affected his standing as a politician. The Socialists saw the episode as yet a further example of Berisha's growing isolation both externally and internally. Although Berisha appears to have maintained a strong hold over the party machinery, there is little evidence that he has managed to maintain a following amongst the broader Albanian population.

V. CONCLUSION

Nine years after the introduction of multiparty politics in Albania, the country still lacks a credible third force as a means for voters to register dissatisfaction with the two main parties. It would be a great step forward if the smaller political parties would put forward more initiatives, and accept greater responsibilities, in order to weaken the dominance of both the SP and the DP. Until this happens, an unhealthy climate of increasing apathy towards the whole democratic process will prevail. Albanians seem disgusted with politics, weary of the continuously tense political situation in the country stemming from the bitter disputes and infighting between the Socialists and Democrats. Albanians are exhausted by the mediocrity of their politicians, most of whom received their political education during the most intellectually arid period of Albanian communism.

As a result, many Albanians simply do not know who to support. Having tested all the current politicians and found them severely wanting, the electors are being asked yet again to choose between Nano and Berisha – the very same leaders whom they associate with the traumatic upheavals of 1997 and 1998. There is, therefore, a strong possibility of large-scale abstention, with an estimated 50 per cent of electors perhaps intending to boycott the poll. On a less than optimistic note, the daily *Shekulli* concluded

³⁷ ICG discussions with DP supporters, Tirana and Durres, June 2000.

³⁸ Lazar Semini, *IWPR*, Pristina, 17 June 2000.

³⁹ See, for example, the daily *Albania*, 16 June 2000.

that only a handful of militants and activists from the various political parties would actually participate in the elections.⁴⁰ The Socialists and their allies are hoping that Berisha's reputation as an irresponsible, unpredictable troublemaker will ensure their victory. Indeed, without Berisha at the helm of the DP, the Socialists would have very little chance of securing a victory against the strong right-wing opposition. They would also find it hard to attract wavering voters.

Within the DP itself, the "Young Reformers" can afford to bide their time, comfortable in the knowledge that, although Berisha might command the support of his hard-core party followers, in the country as a whole DP supporters are showing increasing support for the more moderate, reform-minded, younger DP elements. The reformists see themselves as the DP's leadership-in-waiting, hoping that Berisha will burn himself out during this campaign, thus clearing the path to eject him from the leadership of the party in time to prepare for next year's general election.

However, even though the DP will almost certainly not win the 80 per cent of local offices it holds at present, it will likely still win a sizable proportion. It must be hoped that newly elected DP mayors will use the funds allocated to their districts by the central government in a responsible manner. It is encouraging to see that relations between the ruling parties and the opposition, although savage in Tirana, are more civil in the provinces, where there is a certain degree of co-operation between them.

Regrettably, the politics of power and personalities, rather than of policies, still mark the political scene in Albania. There may be more than a grain of truth in the recent statement by the pro-DP daily *Albania* when it claimed that, "this autumn's elections will be won by whichever political grouping has the strongest gang."⁴¹ Until the political classes accept the conventions of normal, inter-party behaviour found in other Western-style democracies, there is a danger that the effectiveness of international legislative and institution building assistance will again be wasted. Stability in Albania is important to the success of international community efforts in Kosovo and in the rest of the Stability Pact zone. The lesson of the last three years is that democracy in Albania is still a fragile and developing commodity, and the need for international attention and support is undiminished.⁴² After talking to ordinary Albanians across the political spectrum, a visitor is left with the impression that the campaign slogan most would like to see representing both the Socialist and Democratic parties is – "Time for a Change."

Tirana/Brussels, 25 August 2000

⁴⁰ *Shekulli*, 12 July 2000.

⁴¹ *Albania*, 13 June 2000.

⁴² Ambassador Geert Ahrens, Head of OSCE Presence in Albania, "Democratisation and Institution Building in Albania," Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 4 May 2000.

APPENDIX

POLITICAL COALITIONS

Some of the smaller parties appear to be wary of aligning themselves with any of the coalition groupings. Others have been advised to present their own candidates to the electorate. Although by mid-August it is still not clear which parties will run independently or within a coalition, below the main political parties are listed according to their post-1997 coalition alliances. Altogether 34 parties, including at the last minute the DP, have registered to participate in the local elections.

Alliance for the State

Socialist Party
Social Democratic Party
Democratic Alliance Party
Union for Human Rights
Agrarian Party
National Unity Party
Conservative Party

Union for Democracy

Democratic Party
Christian Democratic Party
Liberal Union Party
Albanian Democratic Union Party
National Front Party
Legality Movement Party 2

United Right

Republican Party
Democratic National Front
Legality Movement Party 1
Movement for Democracy.