

Mapping Albania's Path in the 1990s: Between Authoritarianism and Democratisation

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Abstract

For nearly half a century as one of the most repressive communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe, thoroughly lacking a democratic political culture, Albania is considered to have undergone a prolonged and difficult transition towards liberalisation. Despite the political transformations that occurred in the beginning of the 1990s, the democratic quality continued to be influenced by the legacies of the past. In this context, the article focuses on the trails of Albania's political behaviour during the new pluralistic order where features of authoritarianism and intolerance were continuously manifested by the country's leadership. Given the frequent instability atmosphere, the article analyses and assesses the key moments of the first post-communist decade by trying to demonstrate that the need to build a proper democratic political system was (un)intentionally ignored by the ruling elite in turns, consequently leading to a rather distorted picture of Albania's transition path in the 1990s.

Keywords: Transition, authoritarianism, democratisation, Socialist Party, Democratic Party

1. Introduction

Despite the deep scars that the totalitarian regime had left since the end of World War II, Albania showed its first signs of movement towards an atmosphere of eventual liberalization from the mid 1980s (Biberaj, 2000, p.55). In his speech to the 9th Congress of the Labour Party, the communist leader spoke of the freedom-loving, democratic and peace loving aspirations of the European peoples (Vickers, 1995, p.211). Being uttered in an era of totalitarianism, such words demonstrated that the future pathway of the country would be different in a way or another. The factors that would shape it, be they political, economical, social, cultural, historical or international were not going to operate separately but intertwined with one another. Indeed, it was noticeable, that Albania would soon embark 'on nothing less than a metamorphosis away from communist dictatorship' (Elbasani, 2004, p.33). However, it still remained to be seen what this phase of transformation was going to produce, and whether the country would find the energy to move beyond authoritarian politics and embark on a successful democratisation trajectory.

Paradoxically, during the first post-communist decade of the country, a "democratic deficit" was noticed. The political culture of authoritarianism remained deeply embedded, and as a result, the state failed to function [properly] in the new pluralistic context (Jano, 2008, p.59). Therefore, in order to shed more light on this important period of history, by employing some relevant interpretative literature on post-communist transition, this article outlines some of the key moments that shaped the bumpy trajectory of the Albanian fledgling (il)liberal model of governance. By examining some of the peculiarities of the transition process throughout the 1990s, reminiscing the old ways despite their new wrap up, it is argued that the lack of proper commitment to democratic norms of thinking and behaviour by the new ruling elite, unavoidably led to a much polarised political scene and a harder path along the democratisation journey.

2. The early steps towards change

The collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe would unavoidably have a domino effect on Albania as well. The country's 1988 participation in the Balkan Co-operation Conference in Belgrade was a notable landmark for Albanian diplomacy, as it meant that the system's isolationism was over (Vickers & Pettifer, 1997, pp.15-16; Vickers, 1995, p.211). Despite this, in reality the Labour Party still maintained its strong grip over the country, at least until the revolution in Romania made it clear that popular ferment was toppling communist regimes elsewhere (Elbasani, 2004, p.33). The first appearance of intellectual dissidents in late 1989 was soon followed by 'the first gestures towards political liberalization' (Vickers, 1995, p.215; Biberaj, 2000, pp.58-61), but the set of lipstick concessions undertaken by the ruling elite to avoid the fate of communism in other Eastern European countries, were not sufficient to prevent the escalation of unorganised

popular demonstrations. The wind of change finally led to the formation of the first opposition Democratic Party (DP) in December 1990 around a small group of intellectuals and students, whose program, among others, consisted in Albania's "return to Europe" and commitment to a multiparty system (Biberaj, 2000, p.140; In Elbasani, 2004, p.34).

Such a large and challenging leap, however, could not be properly and substantially faced yet. The apparent 'confined track' that the new party system had to face, accounted for the weakness of a massive 'bottom-up movement' and lack of an "Albanian Havel" (Cotta, 1994, p.122; Pridham, 1997, p.35). Indeed, a great number of intellectuals, students, or simply non-conformists – who had dreamed of liberalism, democracy, and pluralism – had already started to think about their future by emigrating abroad, whereas for those who remained, politics would serve as a good career. The first multi-party peaceful elections in March 1991, won by the communists, showed that the DP was still not appealing to the large rural population (Vickers & Pettifer, 1997, pp.57-58; Biberaj, 2000, p.156). Therefore the new opposition had to make use of other means to get to power and institutionalize the scale of the wind of change.

Even the newly elected government led by Fatos Nano, despite its communist background, 'envisaged fundamental reforms, including an extensive privatisation and a rapid shift to a market-based economy' (Vickers & Pettifer, 1997, p.64; see also Kubicek, 1998). In a situation of rapid economic disintegration, such measures were the only way that could help become competitive and 'convert the existing power...to liberal democracy' (Lewis, 1997, p.402). A similar policy was also reflected in the deep reformation process to which the ruling left-wing party subjected itself, logically, in order to adjust to the necessities of the new era. However, the trade unions' general strike, along with the opposition deputies' frequent abstentions, could not save the so-renamed Socialist Party (SP) from losing governance of the country any longer. Two successive provisional governments proved to be a useless attempt. The power-hungry Berisha and his group' constrained President Alia to decree fresh elections, and give Albania a second chance to have a breakthrough with the past. (Vickers & Pettifer, 1997, p.65; Biberaj, 2000, pp.197-200).

The March 1992 elections finally brought to power the "progressive" new Democratic Party. What needs to be emphasized is 'the good luck wish' that the DP received from the defeated chairman Nano, something which would show for the first and probably the last time, that democracy means acceptance of the people's will (Vickers, 1995, p.231). The misery and despair that Albania was facing, was answered by 'the Democrat's own admission, that the rebuilding of the country's devastated economy would be a long and slow process' (ibid, p.233). The 'first priority' of the new government just a few days later would be the exhuming processes and the expropriation of the SP's main building in Tirana, these actions practically signalled that the future political environment in Albania would most likely be based on intolerance. Although analysts expected that after the first excitement of democratic transition the post-election country would have to face a series of problems and overcome a difficult legacy, few could foresee the trajectory of its adventure in realising democracy (Elbasani, 2004, p.34).

3. Settling the old scores through old methods

'The eagerness for power regardless of the cost' was the first real threat that the Albanian fledgling liberal democracy had to face (Vickers & Pettifer, 1997, p.87). To distract the people's attention from the deteriorating economy, a series of 'show trials' was 'settling the old scores' (Vickers, 1995, pp.235-238). The credibility of the democratic government was damaged even more when the opposition leader, Nano, faced trial. Indeed, 'the subsequent resignation of two... judges, and widespread adverse comment on the judicial procedures' (ibid. pp.238-239) was sufficient evidence to cast doubts upon the nature of the final verdict, which could signal the shaking foundations of Albania's liberal democratic dream. Elements of 'the openness to alternative leadership' were already fading in parallel sequence with the growing centralization of all the real power around President Berisha (Lewis, 1997, p.417). The continuous expelling of every opposing voice even within the Democratic Party itself and the replacement of specialists with party partisans was leading unavoidably to the creation of a new party state (Elbasani, 2004, p.35; 2009, p.77; Kubicek, 1998, p.2) that gradually elevated people's crisis of confidence towards the new intolerant leadership.

'The first opportunity that the Albanians would be offered in order to express their opposition to such authoritarian trends, was the 1994 Constitutional referendum...' (Vickers & Pettifer, 1997, p.246). The final draft, which attempted to create a strong central presidency at the expense of the parliament, did not proceed through normal steps. The matter being put to people, resulted in 'an overwhelming anti-government vote' (ibid, p.261), and this defeat was a real test for the government. Indeed, it was a 'nay' to the state's inefficiency in building independent institutional bodies and a 'nay' to the visible past patterns' legacy. Surprisingly, instead of serving as a warning bell, the ballot results helped the leadership of the country

draw distorted lessons for the future. The subsequent “response to approaching elections was quite authoritarian: the use of all means to retain power, showing contempt for the rule of law and fundamental democratic principles” (Elbasani, 2004, p.36).

‘The domestic unpopularity, which continued to dominate political life throughout 1995, was also associated by contradictions within the Democratic ruling Party (Vickers & Pettifer, 1997, p.270). Berisha’s old policy of expelling or eliminating opponents had continued affecting even the Chairman of the DP, Selami; the co-founder of the DP, Pashko; the head of the Supreme Court, Brozi; and the leading newspaper publisher, Lesi. Fearing an opposition victory in the upcoming elections, the DP devised a number of radical laws, in the hope that it would generate a second victory and re-establish a one-party state (Vickers, 1995, p.276; Elbasani, 2004, p.35). The Genocide Law of 1995 was a negation of the right “to elect and get elected”. The implementation of this law would ban more than a quarter of the SP parliamentarians, including the leaders of the two main opposition parties, from holding any kind of office based on their political background (Dinmore, 1997, p.2). Indeed, such an open violation of the democratic competition rules would widen the path for an eventual ‘looming crisis’.

The 1996 elections’ campaign signalled the foreseeable results of the approaching ballot. The state-controlled media and ‘the police and the secret service (SHIK) intimidation of the opposition candidates’ implied that the ‘survival of the party was equated directly with the survival and welfare of the state’ (Greco, 1998, p.203; Vickers, 1995, p.242). Unable to resist the state-led pressure and massive irregularities, the opposition parties ‘boycotted the balloting just hours before it ended’ (Vickers & Pettifer, 1997, p.282). The doubtful victory of 122 (out of 140) seats for the democrats was a warning that this could possibly ‘jeopardise the country’s prospects for democratic developments’ (ibid, p.283). By the mid 1990s it was quite obvious that Albania had failed to make a decisive break with the old authoritarian model of governing, despite having embarked on some reforms that would move the country from isolationism to democratic changes. As an analyst pointed out, while President Berisha “wanted democracy for Albania, it looked like he didn’t understand the meaning of it or how it worked” (In Elbasani, 2004, p.35).

4. State of Albanisation - the wind of collapse

The successive focus of the democratic government on its own personal survival was accompanied by a lack of anticipation of a major common threat. Despite some international agencies’ warnings – like from the World Bank or the International Monetary fund about some shadowy economic activities – President Berisha restrained his government from interfering in the money-lending schemes (Greco, 1998, p.203). This was probably associated with his intention of not alienating people before the local elections. Therefore, this lack of state intervention unavoidably led towards a total bankruptcy of the domestic economy and people’s growing resentment because of the collapse of pyramid dealings. Approaching the end of the 20th century, Albania was drifting backwards further and further backwards due to the ‘poor management of the economic transition’ (Elbasani, 2004, p.36).

Eventually the protesters’ demands for political changes were answered by the use of force. What was ‘considered as a political crisis’ soon escalated to an armed one (Dinmore, 1997, p.2). The rebels’ demands for Berisha’s resignation were soon responded to by his re-nomination for a second mandate (ibid. p.2). His call for a multinational force could be judged as meeting his need to hold on power. But the multinational “ALBA forces” role was mainly crucial in the securing of a peaceful electoral environment which would settle the future government’s legitimacy on leading the devastated country. What remained to be seen was whether problems were frozen or resolved! (Greco, 1998, p.56) Although some observers backed the claims of Berisha that the riots of 1997 were a counterrevolution aimed at restoring communism, they actually simplified a more complex situation – a rough-edged level of political culture combined with a facade democracy, which had morphed into an authoritarian system and a failed first transition (Elbasani, 2004, p.36).

Indeed, the process of Albanian politics’ civilisation would be rather hard to reach. Unsurprisingly, the crisis led to the ousting of the DP and the election (in another dubious electoral contest) of the former communist party successors, the SP (O’Brennan & Gassie, 2009, p.64). Their victory on 29 June 1997 was followed by a campaign of political dismissals reflecting behaviours as if they owned the state. Moreover, Prime Minister Nano, who had already suffered imprisonment for nearly four years, displayed the same inclination to concentrate and personalise power against the formal separation of powers, the opposition who was refused to be seen as anything more than corrupted and criminalized, and the internal fractions organized around new party members like Ilir Meta and Pandeli Majko (In Elbasani, 2004, p.36).

In addition, the similarly intolerant mentality of the SP ruling elite, led to six arrests among the DP opposition deputies charged for crimes against humanity during the clashes of 1997, adding further fuel to the hot and fierce polarised atmosphere that existed between the two camps (Gazeta SOT, 2015, p.11). Coinciding with a period when the opposition was attempting to overthrow the government through a frequent boycotting policy, the assassination of the prominent opposition deputy, Hajdari, after having survived previous attacks, blew up the era of dialogue (Kubicek, 1998, p.7; Vickers & Pettifer, 2007, pp.158-170). An attempted *coup d'état* in September 1998 put the country once more under threat, but the people's lack of enthusiasm together with the international factor brokerage brought a quick end to it. The enforced resignation of Prime Minister Nano gave hope to a new generation of politicians, but the question remained whether the political class would move beyond cosmetic changes.

5. Picking up the pieces

The second period of transition was rendered moribund by power struggles among elites which determined the nature of much of political life (O'Brennan and Gassie, 2009, p.64). The new SP successor, Majko, indeed scored more popular support because of his cooperative spirit. The new constitution draft that he led towards victory by the end of 1998 brought the country a feeling of humble stability. Being broadly praised for its conformity with the international democratic standards, this constitution would guarantee fundamental rights and freedoms, and reinforce the separation of powers. 'The problem, however, is that the democratic institutions have often become instruments of political struggle, and forced to take sides with the party in power' (Elbasani, 2004, p.41).

One of the main differences between the new generation of the Albanian political class and their older colleagues of the first transition phase was that they were not encumbered by the hatreds and injustices they think to have suffered in the past and the perceived need to use their power for their own revenge (ibid., p.42). However, the structural-historical deficit of the weakness of the state compounded by the tendency to converge not around ideologically defined party programmes but rather around networks based on ties to family, clan and kinship (O'Brennan and Gassie, 2009, p.72), continued to cause serious problems to the political and institutional stability and efficiency of the country. Therefore, the atrophy of the journey towards democratisation kept remaining an endemic feature of Albania.

The political dynamics, by and large, showed that there was a huge gap between the ratification of a muddle of democratic codes and their implementation in practice (Elbasani, 2004, p.41). On the one hand, the former Berisha's self-proclaimed democratic leadership was characterised by a notable set of authoritarian features which, to a certain extent, were expected due to the inertia of the totalitarian legacy of the country. On the other hand, even the successive SP governments did not distance themselves from the use and abuse of democratic institutions that often produced 'administrative tsunamis' and 'wholesale changes' leading to greater difficulties in consolidating rule-based democratic institutions and the rule of law (O'Brennan and Gassie, 2009). Indeed, the tendency of identifying the state with the party in power continued to constitute the most identifiable feature of domestic politics of Albania even by the end of the first post-communist decade, putting a barrier to the consolidation of democracy and leaving its chances for success as an open-ended issue.

6. Conclusion

The democratisation processes in Albania proved to be long, difficult and tiring during the 1990s. The end of the one-party state and the emergence of a free-market economy initially raised high hopes among the people, but the fragility of the new democratic institutions, the atrophy of the rule of law, and the continuous serious problems of the political spectrum were regularly manifested in the Albanian post-communist governance by affecting the nature of transition profoundly. Indeed, the post-communist state and even society found great difficulty in breaking with many habits of the past, both personal and institutional alike (Vickers & Pettifer, 1997, p.3). The prevailing authoritarian fashion, unsurprisingly, reflected its negative impact on the demonstrably unfair elections and extreme party political contestation (O'Brennan & Gassie, 2009), showing that the first decade of the country's transition was not very fertile for the introduction of the political culture of liberal democracy.

Meanwhile, throughout the mid-1990s, poor management of the economic transition achieved its climax with the collapse of the fraudulent pyramid schemes that wiped the people's savings. The subsequent Albanian anarchy of 1997 and the quasi-destabilization in 1998, – also results of the conflicting political culture demonstrated by the parties – proved that they were as 'infected' as of their communists predecessors, since political opponents were considered as 'enemies' (Jano, 2008, p.59). Changes in government were followed by inevitable changes in every layer of the public administration as the

SP and DP rewarded supporters and punished public servants identified with the other side (O'Brennan & Gassie, 2009, p.72); this added continuous fuel to the polarised environment of the country, making its democratisation journey longer and rougher.

The political dynamics, by and large, showed that there was a huge gap between the ratification of a muddle of democratic codes and their implementation in practice (Elbasani, 2004, p.41). The personalisation of power, the use and abuse of democratic institutions and widening the gap with the opposition were typical features that accompanied the trajectory of Albania's transition path even during the late 90s. In this respect, 'the main lesson to be drawn here is that democratization is possible but only if we are prepared to think 'outside the box'' (Warleigh, 2003, p.200). Indeed, the commitment to democratic norms and standards has not been able to go beyond the facade rhetoric of the country's elites from both sides of the political spectrum, resulting unavoidably in very poor management of the transition processes during the first post-communist decade.

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