

An Analysis of Some of the Factors that Affect the Role of Party Leaders in Election Campaigns in Albania

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Abstract

In recent election campaigns in Albania, whether general or local, party leaders have become increasingly important. There is a dominance of party leaders in political communication in an electoral campaign. Increasingly the media focus is on leading individuals, neglecting parties and collective identities. Political leaders now serve as a shortcut to informing the electorate. But why does this happen? Is this a feature of the Albanian electoral reality or a trend and influence from developed democracies? What are some of the specific circumstances in the country that enabled this change? Is it a demand from the electorate or an imposition on it? What role does media play in this regard? These and other matters related to it such as: how the party leaders are elected, internal party democracy issues, the methods and tactics of campaign organization, the role of electoral rules and the type of electoral system, etc. shall be briefly addressed in this paper, which is based on observations and analysis of three election campaigns, two general elections (2017 & 2021) and one local (2015).

Keywords: political communication, media, party leader, campaign, etc.

Introduction

In the recent election campaigns in Albania, whether local or general, there is an increasing role of leaders of political parties. We do not even exaggerate if we say that they are dominating the traditional media and especially television screens. This is not just an Albanian phenomenon, although the culture of political communication in the country is favorable for such a show. Nowadays, the role of party leaders in the political campaigns is also increasing in developed western democracies.

Personalization, according to Professor of Political Science Laura Karnoven refers to "the notion that individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities" (p. 4).

Why does this happen?

If we refer to different studies, we notice that the reasons vary.

“Leaders matter, and that under certain circumstances, they can matter a lot” (Bittner, p. 126).

Let us analyze some of the circumstances that make their role important in Albania.

1. The power of leaders comes from the political parties they represent.

In addition to their party's electoral weight, there are also two other specific moments:

The way of electing party leaders.

In Albania, leaders of the main political parties are elected according to the principle of 'one member - one vote'. The membership votes for the nominated candidates. The other party leading bodies are elected with the vote of congress delegates, or a council or committee members elected by the congress.

It is precisely the way they are elected that renders them almost all-powerful, compared to other party leaders. The Professor of Political Science Fortunato Musella highlights the argument of Massari¹ who states that "the internal party regime moves from the parliamentary model to a presidential one" (p. 33).

The situation of internal party democracy

One of the deficiencies of the organization of political parties in Albania is precisely the lack of internal democracy. Party leaders, after being elected to this post, propose and practically define "their teams", which formally become party leadership teams. Neither of the two parties that have governed the country in these past 30 years of transition, allows the existence of factions. They are prohibited by the party statute. The dissenting opinion finds little room, different voices are not heard, and in cases when it becomes public in the media, often the respective individuals have signed the end of their political careers within the party.

2. Selection of candidates for central or local government bodies.

Given the situation when there is no 'primary' within the party and when party members or supporters have very little voice in the selection of party candidacies for members of Parliament or local government bodies, this right is entrusted to the senior party governing bodies. But in reality, the party lists of candidates are compiled by the party leader, or a small group of people led by him/her, and the approval by other party bodies is only of a formal nature. It seems as if the race between the candidates is no longer to gain the approval of the party membership, but it has instead been replaced with candidates racing to please the leader. It is the party leader who can jump start, aid or hinder the individual political careers, within a party and beyond.

¹ Massari, Oreste. 1987. *Le trasformazioni nella direzione del PSI: la direzione e i suoi membri (1976-1984)*

This time, in the elections of April 2021, DPA¹ started a process aimed at listening to the voice of the membership in this selection process, but in the end, as in other occasions, it was the higher party members and the leader who made the selection and ranking of the candidates in the party lists for MP candidates.

Even in the local elections of 2015, the selection of candidates for local government bodies was implemented in the same way. Well-known researcher and director of the Institute of Political Studies in Tirana, Mr. Afrim Krasniqi voices this concern: "I would like the candidates to be recognized many months in advance so that they have time to prepare their staff, programs and train for the election. It may happen that completely unknown individuals with no administrative experience can become mayors, because they are a last-minute choice of party leaders" (Telegraf, 2015).

3. Another factor that explains the importance of party leaders is the electoral system.

The electoral system in Albania is a proportional regional system, since 2009. Only in the last parliamentary elections were open lists implemented, but the ranking of candidates was determined by political parties.

Either for the sake of the tradition and party affiliations of the electorate, or because of the fact that the system made it very difficult to overturn the ranking in party lists ["To change the ranking of the list, a candidate must receive more preferential votes than the average number of votes received by the nominating party per each seat in the region" (OSCE, 2021)], only three candidates managed to change the order and get elected in the next Parliament, as voter preferences. Other winning candidates, often with very few votes, are grateful for the selection by party leaders.

4. Albanian political tradition, especially that of political transition.

Reading through the pages of the Albanian history books, one notes that strong, powerful individuals are idolized. The monist system also put the dictator Hoxha at the center of its propaganda.

After establishment of the multi-party democratic system, in the last 30 years of political campaigns and clashes, the political scene and especially political communication has been dominated by party leaders. Clashes and battles between the two main political parties, DPA vs. SPA² have been clashes and battles among Berisha-Nano³, Berisha-Rama, and recently Basha-Rama.

5. An ongoing duel!

In 2011, began the electoral political clash between Rama-Basha, for the Municipality of Tirana. Basha's victory, by only a few more votes, was contested and was not

¹ DPA - Democratic Party of Albania

² SPA - Socialist Party of Albania

³ Berisha, historic leader of DPA, 1990-2013.

Fatos Nano, historic leader of SPA, 1991-2005.

accepted by Rama, who never congratulated the winner, and it resembled the first act of a duel, which continues to date.

6. Less campaigning for programs and alternatives...

In the last two election campaigns (2017 & 2021) it was noted that at the center of the campaign were not the programs and issues of concern but the party leaders.

Bittner acknowledges that “leader evaluations may act as a shortcut (information shortcut – author’s note) for the least politically sophisticated” voters (p.118). In Albania, where political parties, some more than others, focus their campaign more on leaders than on platforms and ideas, a good part of the electorate qualifies under the status of less informed.

In 2017, different from before, the campaigns deviated from issues of concern to voters and was dominated by exchanges and political retorts between top leaders.

Two words were suddenly the most used in the political vocabulary of the campaign. ‘pie-pan’ and ‘steering wheel’. Those were the words you woke up to in the morning, echoed by political shows, and the words that sent you to bed at night.

‘Steering wheel’ meant having the leadership, and political leaders demanded just that. While the ‘pie-pan’ was a metaphor used to symbolize power, and the pie (which had been divided with small political parties) should, at least this time, not be distributed among the many and “dirty” hands that aimed to cut it into small pieces. This time, they needed all of the ‘pie’ to themselves. Only this way it could be of value!

For example, one of the issues that was hardly touched upon was environmental policy. Xhemal Mato of the “Ekolëvizja” organization has stated: “They (politicians – author’s note) should think clearly and precisely about how the future economic development will go. But to eliminate the country’s wealth, to create great pollution, to create environmental situations that lead to great diseases, or the loss of human lives, all these affect the development of a country. Economic development should not be threatened by debts and environmental degradation ... over 70% of political parties have no details about or plan for the environment, in the next four years”. (Nasi, 2017).

In the general elections held this year, as compared to four years ago, both sides, especially the challenger, the DPA made an effort to steer political communication with voters towards issues and alternatives. However, the campaign was again dominated by the role, character, or the ability of leaders. Such a finding also comes from the International Election Observation Mission: “The campaign lacked vigor, and messaging focused on the main party leaders, rather than on genuine issue-driven discourse” (OSCE Statement, 2021).

In the recent electoral campaigns, an “Americanization” of the campaigns is noted. They resemble more presidential-type campaigns. The main media attention is

focused on the two rivals for prime minister, and less and less on the new political parties and movements in the country.

7. *“Media have the power to increase the prominence of party leaders in the electoral process in a multi-party parliamentary democracy” (Takens et al., p. 15).*

The media, whether traditional or social media, pays particular attention to party leaders. Every appearance, meeting, statement, or opinion of the leaders is part of the main news cycle.

Among some of the reasons are public interest, electoral strategies of political parties focus on the leader (character and skills), one media feeds the other, etc.

But despite the increasing adaptation of electoral campaign experiences from developed democracies, there is one feature that remains unchanged over the years. And this is the lack of televised debates in Albania. The challengers insist on such debates, and if they win the election, the next time they just as persistently reject it. Here is how Prime Minister Rama explained in 2017 his rejection to the invitation of his rivals for a televised debate: “Usually politicians who have nothing to lose, grasp at straws and seek to enter into a debate with those who have much more serious things to deal with rather than put on a show that serves no one. I am with people every day, constantly, so I do not intend to participate in a show to exchange quips, which people have heard and are fed up with. And above all, I am not in this campaign to help Luli (Lulzim Basha - democratic rival- author’s note) (Opinion).

So, we may conclude that there are many reasons for the increasing role of political leaders in election campaigns in Albania. Most of them can be grouped into the following:

a. Reasons related to the low level of democracy in the country and especially within the political parties. The role of the leader is of special importance, given the lack of separation of powers, as is often the case in new fragile democracies. Meanwhile political parties, despite of their separate ideology, have one thing in common: the almost absolute role of leaders.

b. Reasons related to the electoral system and electoral rules. The former system of closed lists ties the fate and responsibility of the elected individuals with the political party and not with the voters. The recent change of open lists was diminished by the party ranking of candidates in the list. Therefore, leaders are very important for the selection of MPs.

On the other hand, the television time defined by the electoral laws, tends to favor the winning parties of the last election cycle, and makes it difficult for independent candidates or new parties, which present a more democratic model of organization, to become a factor on the political scene.

c. Reasons related to the media. In addition to various reasons such as political interference in the media, etc., the media is a difficult business in Albania. Therefore,

individual clashes, rhetoric and negative retorts among leaders are more attractive and profitable than focusing on issues and governing alternatives.

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