

The Beginning of the End of a Rebellion: Southern Albania, May-June 1997

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During February 1997 the crisis which had been building up in Albania as a series of ill-founded pyramid savings schemes collapsed, erupted into angry demonstrations, culminating in armed revolts. In early March they quickly spread to most of the south of the country. Public buildings were attacked and burned, prisoners were released from gaol, and effective control of a wide area passed into the hands of armed gangs. For a few weeks journalists travelled the country and sent back words and pictures. Then Albania disappeared again from headlines and television screens until elections were held at the end of June. In between there was a period of seeming non-events, little more than an interregnum, that was in reality a distinct phase in its own right.

During this period, in May 1997, I went to southern Albania to do a participant observation study of the recently privatised agriculture in the districts of Gjirokastër and Fier. I had visited these areas several times before, most recently during the local election campaign in 1996. The particular advantage of participant observation is that it elicits clues about intangibles and imponderables,¹ the fragments that make up everyday experience, that more formal research methods rarely reveal. I was able to observe at close quarters, and to document, what the media referred to euphemistically as 'the situation', and people called bluntly '*lufta*', the war.

Being a study from the bottom up, this documentation illuminates important dimensions of a very fraught episode of the recent

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1. Piotr Sztompka, 'The Intangibles and Imponderables of the Transition to Democracy,' *Studies in Comparative Communism*, 25,3 (1991): 295-312.

history of Albania. It captures and places on record a passing phase, much of the evidence of which, once the elections were over, was quickly assimilated into subsequent experience, and was no longer distinguishable from it. Just as those who lived through the worst weeks of violence were in some way marked by their experiences, everyone who was subjected to the all-pervading stresses in the period which followed has, if in less obvious ways, been affected by them.

As well as being stressful, and often tedious, the period leading up to the elections was one of endless talk among family and friends, and of quiet, dogged progress. While outside observers, and even some Albanians, had doubts about the prospects for the elections and expressed amazement that they went so well,² at the grassroots there were no doubts they would be held on the date planned (29 June). Had they been delayed it would have precipitated a crisis and much despair. Though not all stages of the preparations (which in Albania may include writing out voters' lists by hand) were completed on schedule,³ those responsible for completing them, especially at the local level,⁴ were as aware as anyone else that this was the case.

People saw the election as an opportunity they eagerly grasped to do something positive to resolve a situation all but the bandits wanted to end. Only the most naive saw the election as an instant solution. More common was a degree of scepticism, a recognition that whatever the outcome, problems would remain. Some speculated on the result that would bring most stability (or the least instability), such as a coalition to prevent any one party gaining too much power. Others saw a potential for an increase in violence again once the elections were over (as did occur briefly when the Multinational Protection Force (FMP) withdrew in August),

2. E.g. Franz Vranitzky, 'Albanians did it all themselves,' *Illyria*, #674, 18-20 October 1997.

3. 'OSCE Asked Albanian Politicians to Honour Poll or lose Aid', *Albanian Daily News*, July 1997.

4. By this time the administration of the legal authorities had been restored and the so-called 'salvation committees' had evaporated. One of the first tasks of the coalition government appointed on 11 March was to restore local government functions, which it did.

while hoping they would be wrong. A weekly current affairs magazine portrayed the election as a hand grenade.⁵ The overwhelming feeling was that it was a vital step, perhaps the only chance, to begin to put an end to the chaos and move forward again.

The 'war' of spring 1997

In Gjirokastër the protests had at first been peaceful. Many who participated initially, some who describe themselves as intellectuals as well as others with clearly directed political aims, had no connection with those universally referred to as bandits who hijacked the protests and who, apart from ritually denouncing the then president, Sali Berisha, were not concerned with politics. The situation was mishandled by the central authorities from the outset, and this set an unfortunate pattern for the future. When Berisha met university students on hunger strike in support of their colleagues in Vlorë, he patronised them by not answering their questions. They were further provoked when the meeting was shown on the television news with the footage manipulated; the cheers and boos had been reversed. When the violence started the hunger strike collapsed and most students left.

During the worst violence it was dangerous to go outdoors. There were men in the streets shooting into the air and standing on the castle walls shooting onto the town below. People put sacks of flour in windows and spent nights huddled on the floor in case a bullet came through a window. Many were in a state of shock.⁶ At night neighbours patrolled around their houses in shifts so they would not be robbed. They got weapons to defend themselves and sought competent people to show them how to use them. Though the image most widely conveyed was of reckless plundering of weapons, even at this stage (perhaps especially then) many of the arms in circulation were being handled responsibly. Later the local authorities handed out weapons and ammunition to some businesses, again in an orderly way; all were signed for.

5. *Klan*, 1 June 1997.

6. Personal communication by telephone from an informant in Gjirokastër, 15 March 1997.

The greatest damage was done to public buildings, and some shops were burnt. The police station was destroyed and windows were broken in an army barracks next to it. On the edge of town an arms store, plundered for ammunition, was left wrecked and dejected. The local council offices lost some windows, and the Democratic Party offices were ransacked. The bank was ram-raided by a tank, leaving a large hole where the entrance had been. (Local people claimed the robbers came from Tepelenë, the next town). Schools were shot at and the windows broken, and the university was vandalised. Outside the town a motel built, ironically, next to the arms store by the Gjallica pyramid company of Vlorë was reduced to a collection of walls, smoke-blackened, stripped of anything removeable or reuseable. A cheese factory 15 kilometers away, built by the same company only the previous autumn, and not yet operating, suffered a similar fate.

Life in a war zone

In time the level of violence lessened. People sought to resume more-or-less normal lives, at least in the daytime. Each morning shops opened and there was the bustle of the market in full swing. People from the villages brought produce to sell, and fishermen from Sarandë sold their catch. Men hung around in the street and in bars or played bingo in the cinema. By mid-May the children were back at school (schools were closed in March under the state of emergency). Evenings were like in any summer. People walked up and down the broad main street, kiosks and bars were open, in the stadium young men kicked a ball around and children played between blocks of flats.⁷

Yet the appearance of normality was no more than that. There were many signs that life was far from normal. Kiosks had only small quantities of goods. Shops were kept shuttered, with only the entrances open, and when they were closed their windows were covered so it was impossible to see inside. Money was short, as no-one who got their income from the state had been paid for three

7. See Beryl Nicholson, 'Inside Southern Albania May-June 1997', *Albanian Life* 62 (Winter 1997): 7-10, and 'Down among the bandits: Fieldwork in South Albania May-June 1997', *Network* 69 (January 1998): 27-28.

months. Concrete blocks obstructed the rear entrance to a filling station to make it difficult to drive through. During the day there were occasional shots, like firecrackers going off. People would shrug *'lufta'* (the war), they had grown used to it. Though university students had returned to Tiranë, in Gjirokastrë there were no regular classes at the university, only teaching by correspondence. Confidential materials and valuable items such as typewriters had been hidden. Even so, someone broke in one night and stole what was left. Children collected cartridge cases and played bandits with toy guns or improvised pea shooters. Once I saw a boy of about twelve with a hand grenade. Though there were policemen in uniform, armed, on the streets, they did little but stand around and chat, or at night make a rare sortie in armoured cars up and down the main street.

There was a constantly evolving *modus vivendi*, its limits largely set by the bandits by subtle, and less subtle, forms of intimidation. There was also a sense of shared guilt, of complicity, people seeing in the bandits what they feared was a dark side of themselves. 'Everyone likes to be part of it', if only in small ways, I was told, 'honest with one hand, a bandit with the other'. The poet Marash Mirashi made the same point when he cynically equated the peace-loving citizens of the daytime with the 'three million guns' that 'declare war on the sky' at night.⁸ The population of Albania is around three million.

The bandits were plainly in evidence in their daytime meeting place in front of the stadium. Everyone knew who they were. The leading characters wore dark glasses and sleeveless vests to show off their muscles. They spent their days in one of the more expensive bars in town and driving around, usually in 'Benz' (Mercedes), some without plates, even without a wing panel or door. The latter would eventually reappear with the missing sections restored, but in a different colour. Cars would draw up and their occupants would converse with men who were standing about, or someone would get in or out and they would drive off again. There was evident peer pressure on some men to at least appear to be one of the gang.

8. Marash Mirashi, 'Tre milion pushkë i shpallin luftë qiellit', *Koha Jonë*, 4 June, 1997: 14.

Occasionally a man would openly, though not ostentatiously, carry a kalashnikov, or one might see a couple of armed men quickly moving between apartment blocks, but guns were usually kept hidden and were rarely fired in public. Sometimes a man would fire into the air from behind parked cars, but one of the others would quickly disarm him. One day a man, apparently angry about something, started strolling about in the open waving a kalashnikov and shooting erratically, not always upwards. An audience quickly gathered, and some men tried to restrain him, but he tore himself away and shot a few times more. He only stopped when a mate, at some risk to himself, took the gun from him. There followed scenes of bonhomie and they retired to their favourite bar with the other men. The episode lasted barely five minutes and, nearby, life went on as usual.

At night this changed. The gunmen came out and other people stayed indoors. Once it was dark there would be a loud burst of shooting. Then it might be quiet again for a time; this was usually a false calm before the shooting resumed. (I do not know how long it lasted. Like most people I went to sleep and ignored it.) Sometimes the noise could be very loud indeed. For those who were playing the game, and their number did not seem large,⁹ it was a social activity, gunmen at different points around the houses firing rhythmically and answering one another. Nor was the game confined to shooting. One night there was a fight in the street between the lads from Gjirokastër and their rivals from Tepelenë and the village of Lazarat, about fifty in all. The latter eventually left in a procession of cars amid shouts that they would come back the next night (they did not).

In the town one could feel almost secure inside the thick walls of the apartment blocks, but in the villages people felt much more exposed. People still worked their land and a remarkable number continued to sell their produce in town, but their lives had been made more difficult. Bandits damaged infrastructure, like a water pipe, so water had to be carried further. In some places it was too dangerous to send children to school. To protect themselves people improvised roadblocks at the entrances to villages with large

9. My guesstimate is that by early summer the bandits in the Gjirokastër and Tepelenë areas amounted to, at most, barely one in a thousand of the total population.

concrete blocks or burnt out cars, sometimes guarded by a solitary, nervous policeman. A few families kept a gun behind the wardrobe or under the sofa. Those who had Greek visas (and some who had not) simply left, and many people who were working in Greece were afraid to come back to visit their homes.

At night people were afraid to go out and feared that armed and masked thieves would come into their houses. There was less shooting than in towns, but in a small village house it felt more threatening, the more so when next day the news spread round the village that a man had been killed. Once I saw the body of a murdered man being taken to his village. A procession of cars led by a pick-up, with a man holding a small machine gun sitting on a bench in the back, drove slowly along a country road to the sound of slow singing. The whole district already knew through the bush telegraph who he was, who had killed him and where. Killing seemed to be haphazard. No one I talked to, in towns or the countryside, thought the situation was being used to settle scores. Everyone knew who was responsible, but felt helpless to do anything about it.

A consequence of the insecurity was that few people travelled far, a reversal of one of the more conspicuous changes since 1990. Main roads had become almost devoid of cars again. Few of the cars cruising around towns had other than local number plates, and they were mostly from nearby areas.¹⁰ Train services between Tiranë and Vlorë had been reduced by half to one train each way a day. Resumption of the normal timetable was announced in early June, doubtless as part of government efforts to restore normality, and a television news report sought to persuade people it was safe to travel by train.¹¹

When travelling by road there was some danger of being shot. Bandits drove around in Mercedes, and would shoot from a kalashnikov poking upwards out of the passenger window. The car that took me to the border when I left was shot at and holed, though no-one was hurt, on the return jour-

10. Albanian registration numbers, with a few notable exceptions, begin with the first two consonants of the district name, e.g. TR for Tiranë, TP for Tepelenë. The origin of any vehicle is thus immediately obvious.

11. *tvsh* (Albanian television), 30 May and 3 June 1997.

ney. A greater threat was robbery. Stories¹² abounded of people who had been robbed of everything, even their clothes. A favourite target was the Athens-Tiranë express bus; the bandits would steal all the passengers' money and luggage. The border post itself, still wrecked, was prey to attack. Officially it was closed, but the Greek frontier officials, who keep the key to the gate (it is their gate), continued to let people through. On the Albanian side security was gradually being strengthened. By early June, as well as a policeman or two, it was protected by a tank and military personnel with automatic weapons.

At various points on main roads the rebels had set up roadblocks. Sometimes there would be an armed man posted there, sometimes not. A few kilometers outside Gjirokastër two bridges had been blown up. There were big holes in the road and piles of earth which vehicles had to slow to negotiate. The Ministry in Tiranë attempted to send in engineers by helicopter to inspect the damage. Given that the then government had tried, unsuccessfully, to insert special troops by helicopter on 8 March,¹³ a wrecked helicopter was still on the airfield, this was peculiarly inept. It provoked suspicions that the same was about to happen again, so a crowd of local people prevented the helicopter from landing by shooting anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns at it.¹⁴

Some people did continue to move about as if the situation was normal. Groups of two or three *biznesmen* and a driver would travel around as if there were no security problems. They were invariably vague about what they did, and one did not ask about it or how they got past the bandits.

There were other travellers whose errands appeared to be connected to the political situation, though one pretended not to notice, let alone ask about them. On my one encounter, a *furgon* (a van with windows and seats in the back) with a Tiranë registration, unusual and conspicuous so far south, pulled up at the main bus stop in Gjirokastër heading north. Some men who knew the driver got into the seats

12. Stories are a part of Albanian life. They may or may not be absolutely true, but that is not important. Their message is conveyed by allusion, which has to be interpreted.

They are distinguished from the bush telegraph, which conveys information quickly and, in my experience, reliably.

13. *Le Monde*, 11 March 1997.

14. *Koha Jonë*, 25 May 1997.

and he picked out others from the crowd to ride in the back, deliberately singling me out, 'grua', the (only) woman. It seemed he travelled the road regularly. Whenever we came to an armed guard at a road block he waved and shouted 'nesër' (tomorrow), presumably when he would pay his dues, and drove on at speed. He was obviously known to them and to others along the road. He waved to people as if they were buddies and once stopped to talk to someone he seemed to know well. At a wayside bar he exchanged words with the barkeeper. A companion asked for cigarettes with a hint of a threat in his manner, saying he would pay 'tomorrow'. The man looked unhappy but handed them over without saying anything.

One can only guess at the driver's errand. Possibly it was related to the election preparations of the Socialist Party, or the activities of the rebels, or even, however ambiguously, linked to both. The whole way he carried on a lively conversation about politics with his companions. Two of them got out at a village notorious as a bandit stronghold and the driver had a conversation with someone there. When another passenger, a man with the dark glasses, got out at the turning to another southern town (Berat), he too had a furtive whispered conversation with the driver while he was paying.

There were numerous theories about the relative safety or otherwise of various modes of travel. Some people considered buses were less likely to be robbed than cars, while on certain roads a *furgon* was thought to be safer. Though buses continued to run between towns, there were few of them and limits had obviously been put on where they could go. Buses from Sarandë went no further north than Gjirokastër; those from Tepelenë went no further south.¹⁵ The bandits charged each bus passenger 100 lek¹⁶ for their safe passage. Payment might be organised in advance, then the bus would drive past all the road blocks. Otherwise, at a given point along

15. There was a story (see note 12) that some buses from Tiranë that went along the notoriously dangerous road to Vlorë had disguised their number plates with white paint so TR looked like TP.

16. At that time the exchange rate for the lek was between 188 and 177 to the dollar (*tvsh*, 29 May 1997) and falling. In November 1996 it had been valued at 96 to the dollar, Kosta Barjaba, Cesaro Quinto di Cameli & Luigi Perrone, 'Storia di un disastro annunciato', *Futuribile* 1996, 2-3 (1997): 31.

the route a man in dark glasses would get on the bus and, in my experience in an amiable manner, collect money from each passenger. People complied reluctantly, but no one refused. A bush telegraph seemed to operate between drivers, warning them what was ahead. Some buses carried a guard, a man with a small handgun, clad in the regulation sleeveless vest. On the most dangerous stretches of road, whenever the bus stopped, the driver and Rambo, pistol at the ready, kept anxious watch till the bus moved off again.

The Multinational Protection Force (FMP, deployed in April to protect humanitarian aid and enable the election to be held, patrolled the roads. Though there were grumbles they did not do enough (grumbling is normal in Albania), the troops, furthest south mostly Romanians, were appreciated. When a convoy passed a bus the driver would hoot his horn and passengers would wave (except if the soldiers were Greek).¹⁷ In the far south I saw no other security presence outside towns. Further north, at Ballsh, where the main north-south road descends from the hills, the Albanian army had a check point with a tank (which sometimes guarded the savings bank instead), a big lump of concrete and a couple of soldiers in uniform. It had all the appearance of a frontier post. The police were also more in evidence there than further south, though it did little to reduce the amount of shooting. At the end of May there was a shoot-out between the local police chief and one of the bandits (referred to locally as *mafiosi*). The police chief was badly wounded and was rushed to hospital, the bandit was unhurt and disappeared. The next day armed police went looking for him in the town and the hills beyond.

In Fier, at an important junction on the road from Tiranë to Vlorë, the security presence was greater. Police drove around in a couple of armoured vehicles with weapons on top. A small tank marked '*Policia*', crewed by bored young men in khaki, was parked for long periods at the main cross roads and, belching pollution, made the odd sortie in the direction of Vlorë. Occasionally an FMP jeep drove around too, but they took no notice of one another.

17. People in South Albania resent the way Albanian immigrants are treated in Greece, and they suspect that, whatever its public position, Greece maintains its illicit claim to their region.

People in the street paid no attention to either. In the daytime at least, Fier was lively and seemed remarkably normal. The extensive market was busy, new plate-glass shop fronts were unshuttered and the Savings Bank was open and doing business.

The pyramids from the bottom up

Sooner or later most people I talked to spoke about the pyramid schemes. The most common understanding of where the money had gone was that the people who ran the schemes had made off with it.¹⁸ They seemed to make no connection between the money they had paid in and either the source of the money for interest payments or the substantial sums some companies were spending (nor was the latter explained as mafia money). There is a widespread, if naive, belief in Albania that rich people (and governments, especially those of 'rich' western nations) simply have lots of money; it does not have to come from anywhere, it just exists. The same was thought to apply to the Pyramid companies.

As well as interest payments, there had been several routes by which money from the schemes entered local economies. Some of the schemes had provided assistance for families in need.¹⁹ Funds obtained from 'associations' (*shoqata*), as well as from foreign foundations, and, only a little (a local official emphasised to me) from the state, were paid out each month through the social offices of the communes. Such schemes had a low profile compared with those engaged in commercial activities, which were also of greater economic importance.

The most visible pyramid company in Gjirokastrë was Gjallica, based in Vlorë. Its motel just outside the town (see above p.546), opened in 1995 (as with many bars and restaurants, at first various stories had circulated about the source of the capital). In 1996 the firm was investing heavily in both the motel and its new cheese factory (it made similar investments elsewhere in southern Albania).²⁰ They brought in Italian building workers and engineers

18. c.f. Jochen Blanken, 'Pyramidengesellschaften und wirtschaftlicher Kollaps in Albanien', *Albanische Hefte* 26,1 (1997): 8.

19. c.f. Blanken, 'Pyramidengesellschaften', 6.

20. Blerim Cela, 'Untersuchungsbericht über die Firma Gjallica', *Albanische Hefte* 26,1 (1997): 14.

for weeks at a time. Their representatives who paid their bills (to legitimate businesses) in the town, were treated with extreme deference, and with good reason. It was confirmed to me in private that they paid *very* well.

Gjallica reached perhaps the peak of its popularity when it sponsored the Miss Europe competition in September 1996, coincidentally during the campaign for the local elections. The television spectacular was avidly watched by Albanians, who believed they were impressing the rest of Europe. Next day they watched it over again in an unscheduled rebroadcast. There were occasional commercial breaks for Gjallica, 'our sponsor', always the same slightly puzzling still (like a large piece of cheese floating in the sea). I was assured with absolute certainty that it was costing \$30 000. Other rumours put the sum at \$ 1 million.²¹ Later there was speculation about where the money had gone, but perhaps the answer was nowhere. There is an obvious possibility the money was largely fictitious, the product of the rumours, but an impression had been created that Gjallica had a lot of money, and that doubtless attracted more savers. Whether it was due to the television spectacular or to the rumours, according to newspaper reports, in Vlorë during September Gjallica was taking in \$ 3-400 000 per day.²²

After the crash it was as if the event had never happened. A mention of it to the people with whom I had watched the show produced only a blank, a disinterested amnesia.

People told how they, their families or neighbours had lost money, some a great deal, in one or more schemes. No-one showed any sign of expecting to get anything back, not even those who had savings in Vefa, which, though it had ceased payments, had not collapsed;²³ they were resigned to the loss. Those who had received interest equal to the original capital, even if they had rein-

21. Blanken, 'Pyramidengesellschaften', 7.

22. Blanken, 'Pyramidengesellschaften', 8.

23. Whatever its financial position, Vefa's commercial activities apparently continued. An advertisement placed by Vefa Holdings in *Koha Jonë* on 1 June 1997 announced that Vefa Lines would start a weekly shipping service between Durrës (the port of Tiranë) and Patras (Greece) on 3 June. In October it was said to have started to make repayments to savers, but only to fifty per day, *Le Monde*, 3 October 1997.

vested (80 per cent did), and hence lost, it, thought they were fortunate to have broken even.

Losses, and the corresponding anger, were especially great in the southernmost towns of Gjirokastër and Sarandë because the pyramid companies had opened their offices there later than elsewhere. They were the last layer in the pyramid and no-one had had a chance to get any money back. Money could only be withdrawn after six months, when it had doubled. When the collapse came there were just 20 days left till the schemes were due to pay out. There were also many people from these towns who worked in Greece and had deposited savings from up to five years' work. They were *very* angry.

Those who had invested money had, in many cases, been subject to strong social pressures, not wanting to be seen to miss such an opportunity, or more directly from their peers who had already invested (and thus had a vested interest in recruiting more savers). Some were persuaded against their better judgement. Others saw the schemes as a ray of hope, even if they sensed the risk attached to them. In autumn 1996 I noticed how, given the prospect of getting money through a pyramid scheme, people assumed a previously unknown vitality as they saw the possibility of realising, quite modest, aspirations that had until then been out of reach. In many cases it was for this reason, rather than simply to 'get rich quick' that small savers joined the schemes. So they chose to believe the government which had continued to assure them that pyramid schemes were safe, even though they had seen representatives of the IMF warn on television that they were not. The strong links between politicians and the schemes, especially the fact that government figures had invested in them, gave them respectability. Later people did not deny they could have acted more wisely, but to them their own culpability was minor compared with that of the government. They had been lied to, and by people who ensured they were not caught in the trap themselves. By the time the government passed a law at the end of January 1997 that declared pyramid schemes illegal²⁴ the damage had been done.

24. 'Pyramid schemes declared illegal and those initiating or running them punishable by long terms of imprisonment', *Abstracts Russian and East European Series* (ABREES) 118 (1997): 1

The election campaign and the ‘situation’

International observers expressed concern over limits on freedom of movement which prevented election candidates for certain parties campaigning openly in some parts of the country, arguing that ‘voters were not sufficiently informed to be able to objectively select among the candidates’.²⁵ While the difficulties were genuine, this is an abstract, idealised, view of elections, and the effect on campaigning was less than such statements suggest. By far the most important campaigning vehicle was television, and in this respect Albania does not differ from established democracies. Though public meetings are clearly identifiable forms of campaigning, they reach relatively few people and largely function as events to be televised. The abnormal situation only intensified this tendency: people confined indoors after dark every evening watch a lot of television.

It was well recognised that state television was biased. During the local election campaign in 1996 it had been blatant. In 1997, thanks to international pressure, and perhaps because coverage was being monitored in Italy,²⁶ there was greater fairness in the distribution of air time in news bulletins. In particular the smaller parties had greater visibility than before. Care was obviously taken to maintain balance when representatives of different parties were shown together, as in the electoral commission, and information such as the final list of parties contesting the election was diligently shown in its entirety. The buzz word was ‘transparency’. Less balanced was reporting of particular events. Film of an apparent attempt on the president’s life at a rally, with repeated, clearly accusatory, stills of the alleged perpetrator, was rerun several times on news bulletins the next day. Publicity announcements about a meeting to present candidates of the Democratic Party (PD) and those allied with it were also shown so as to maximise their effect, just before each news bulletin one evening. I saw no equivalent announcements for other parties.

At least 20 minutes of each half hour news bulletin would be taken up by the election campaign, interviews with politicians (the

25. ‘OSCE Asked Albanian Politicians to Honour Poll’.

26. ‘OSCE Asked Albanian Politicians to Honour Poll’.

Democratic Party president, Sali Berisha, and the Socialist Party prime minister, Bashkim Fino, and their respective supporters sometimes using them to conduct their running feud), reports of meetings, visits by foreign delegations and the concurrent campaign on the referendum on restoration of the monarchy.^{26b} This last was treated with indifference in the south. Apart from the odd supporter (I have only ever met one), opinion across the political spectrum was that the pretender, always referred to on television as Leka the first, was exploiting the situation for his own ends. There was particular distaste for his heavily armed entourage.

Each type of report followed the same format whenever it was presented, almost as if there were a standard piece of film that was inserted each time a particular kind of event was reported. Most news bulletins contained items showing people sitting round rectangular tables in near identical offices listening or talking about something not very interesting. The small parties suffered most from poor presentation. Usually they were shown holding formal, and rather staid, meetings.

Apart from rallies held by Leka Zog (reported on most days), in the two weeks I watched only the those of the two largest parties were shown. The effect was to reinforce the message that the election was a contest between them. Each rally was like the next. It was as if the parties had watched footage of rallies in the West and were imitating, and exaggerating, the actions, but had failed to appreciate their purpose. It was campaigning as ritual, not persuasion. There was much flag waving, by the Socialist Party (PS) the Albanian flag and the party emblem (red rose in a hand on a round white and yellow background set in red) and by the PD mostly the (conveniently blue) European flag. Exaggerated acclaim, clapping and cheering greeted the leaders and punctuated their speeches. The PS would have a row of satisfied-looking men on the podium. The PD usually had one main speaker, either a former minister, or, in the televised rallies, usually Berisha himself, with enthusiastic supporters, assisted by cheer leaders, chanting his name. He alternately harangued about the communist threat and uttered a wish-list of buzz words. Occasionally the cutting looked suspicious, as if the

26b. The pretender's father, the self-proclaimed King Zog, went into exile in 1939.

footage had been doctored, and the sound was not always synchronised with the pictures. As the technical quality of presentation was generally poor it was impossible to tell if this was deliberate or merely inept.

Other sources of comment and information were more erratically available. The small private television station in Gjirokaštër, *Antena Jug*, had stopped broadcasting on 3 March and the local weekly paper, *Java* (The Week), had not appeared since then either, but everywhere, including in the villages, some people listened to foreign radio broadcasts in Albanian. The Tiranë newspapers, though by no means all, could be bought in towns (they are rarely available in villages) and were avidly read. They seemed to print what they liked, at least about politicians. Incidents of violence were more selectively, even scantily, reported. Most went unmentioned, others were excessively hyped. When, within a few hours, three bombs exploded in Tiranë the headline read '*Tirana si Algjeri*' (Tirana like Algeria).²⁷

In Gjirokaštër the paper most sold and most widely read both in public and in private, by opponents and supporters of the president alike, even though it was one of his fiercest critics, was *Koha Jonë* (Our Time). Also readily obtainable was the Socialist Party paper *Zëri i Popullit* (The Voice of the People). Occasionally *Gazeta Shqiptare* (Albanian Gazette), which has links to Bari, Italy, could be found, as could *Drita* (The Light), the League of Writers and Artists' weekly. Conspicuously absent were government papers and those allied to it, and those supporting smaller parties.

At Fier, closer to Tiranë, first impressions were much the same. *Koha Jonë* was by far the most popular paper read in public, followed by *Zëri i Popullit*, but several smaller papers (the short-lived *Independent*, *Republika*, of the right-leaning Republican party, *Rilindja* (Renaissance), originally published in Kosova, and *Liria*, the organ of the association of former political prisoners) were also on sale. Most remarkable was that the Democratic Party paper, *Rilindja Demokratike* (Democratic Renaissance) and *Albania*, considered close to the security service SHIK, were openly displayed at a kiosk. This was just one of the more obvious of many indi-

27. *Koha Jonë*, 3 June 1997.

cations that the supposed north-south political divide did not have the significance some have sought to attribute to it.

The net result in the south of the country, was that people were regularly exposed to opposing messages from different sources. Whether this had a major influence on how they voted is doubtful. By the time the election was announced many had already made up their minds.

The situation as election issue

The economic collapse and the 'war' that followed were the context within which the election campaign was conducted, but they were much more. Though the security situation undoubtedly hindered some campaigning, it was of far greater significance as the all-embracing election issue. It ensured that the imminence of the election was never far from most people's consciousness. The events in Albania during the first half of 1997 brought to the surface a latent politicisation,²⁸ though it is doubtful whether there was a corresponding advance in the understanding of democracy.

...A neglected question in the political changes in Eastern Europe is *how* people, given the chance to choose among multiple parties for the first time, have understood how to make those choices. The practice of democracy was perceived in the East as being far easier than it is. This perception was reinforced by the West, which represented democratisation as primarily a matter of creating institutional structures.²⁹ Less attention has been paid to practice within the structures. It was (and continues to be) difficult, for both the electorate and politicians, to learn how to cope with the frustrations, irritations and contradictions of a pluralist system, to tolerate the views of others and respect their right to hold them, to accept being on the losing side, to resolve crises without resort-

28. Even before recent events it was striking that people seemed to regard it as normal to have a party political identification. One might speculate that this was due to their experience of a highly politicised totalitarian state, now translated into pluralist terms. It extended to non-state institutions. In March 1997 the catholic bishops had expressed their full support for Berisha (Barjaba et al., 1997, p.33). During the election campaign, representatives of the three main religious groups (none of them looking comfortable) were in a prominent position in the audience of a televised PD rally in Shkodër, *tvsh* 31 May 1997.

29. e.g. Vranitsky, 'Albanians did it all ...'.

ing to repression, and not to promise what cannot be delivered. Berisha, when president, blamed the people for shortcomings, accusing them of refusing democracy.³⁰ Some ordinary people expressed similar sentiments, doubting Albanians were capable of democracy, echoing a view that had sometimes been heard in the early years after independence. What is beyond doubt is that inexperience is evident on both sides.

Important prerequisites for pluralist elections, such as knowledge of the track records of parties and politicians (many had none) and experience of judging the plausibility of election promises were largely absent and could not be acquired quickly. Besides, in established democracies these evaluations are made in terms of prior experience, some would say prejudices. Voters, as citizens, are inevitably 'positioned subjects', each has 'a distinctive mix of insight and blindness'.³¹ This is as true in Albania as anywhere else, and as variable. For some their own or their family's experiences under the old regime, imprisonment, ill-treatment, or acute privation, has been decisive,³² but it is expressed in different ways. The most emphatic is to support a political party opposed to the socialists; with others it is a negative determination never to support them. There are also those, not only among the old elite, but in villages where once people were poor share-croppers, whose *personal* circumstances improved under the old regime, who feel worse off since democratisation, and who firmly support the Socialist Party. For still other people, the basis from which they started was less clearly defined.

It is probably true that hardly anyone had a clear idea of what

30. Kosta Barjaba, 'La ribellione albanese: motivazioni regionali o politiche?', in Emanuela C. del Re, ed., *Albania punto a capo* (Rome: Edizione SEAM, 1997), 212.

31. Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth. The Remaking of Social Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1989), 19.

32. Tobias F. Svenningsen, *Albansk kultur og samfunn i 90-årene. En del av Europa?* (Bergen, Norway: Forlaget Migrasjonslitteratur, 1997), 137. It has been suggested that anti-communist sentiment 'largely subsided with the disappearance of the communist system', Reginald Hibbert, 'Dealing with the Dispossessed', *The World Today* 53,5 (May 1997): 120. This is too broad a generalisation. Anti-communists remain anti-communists, those who were never anti-communists remain socialists. Even in the south, in private at least, in 1997 the former matched the vehemence of their neighbours who were opposed to Berisha. I never asked direct questions about political allegiance. Many people gave their views quite openly, but with few exceptions in the negative terms of who they opposed, not who they would support in the election. Individual opinions have been carefully hidden to protect the confidentiality of informants.

to expect from democracy. At first people talked about their different political allegiances almost as if they were playing a game. Besides, when communism collapsed in Eastern Europe many people selectively retained some of its elements. Hence they continued to believe in Utopia but transferred that belief to an idealised view of the West. In Albania they tended to fit the new system into the familiar patriarchal framework of the former regime, replacing a wicked father figure with a benign one. So when they voted for emerging anti-communist parties, many were not so much following the agenda assumed in the West, as a different, if parallel, one.

At least part of the mass support for the Democratic Party can be explained in this way. It became, and presented itself as, the new orthodoxy, the only way forward, with slogans such as '*Me PD fitojnë të gjithë*' (With PD everyone wins), and benefited from the switch in allegiance of passive (and opportunistic) supporters of the old regime.³³ In 1996, a villager who knew local opinion, asked about graffiti on a wall claiming 'PD 82%' (of the vote), was adamant it was the genuine result. While this reaction betrays naivety in the face of an implausible result, it is indicative of where the weight of opinion was perceived to lie. Voting irregularities (which even PD members acknowledge in private) undoubtedly account for the scale of the PD victory in 1996, 55 per cent of the vote, compared with 20 per cent for the PS and crumbs for other parties,³⁴ but my soundings suggest the result was nonetheless *in part* due to genuine support, if founded on expectations that were not, could not be, realised.

The pyramid scandal and the ensuing violence and chaos resulted, for many, in a loss of political innocence (not to be confused with gaining political maturity). Many of the more naive supporters of the then President Berisha and the PD became their most vehement opponents. They felt betrayed. This was of far greater significance in determining the outcome of the 1997 election than any campaign could be. It was political shock treatment and, like its economic equivalent, it was painful.

33. Svenningsen, *Albansk kultur*, 120.

34. Stephan Lipsius, 'Albanien - Dauerkrise oder Neubeginn?', *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 37,4 (1997): 250.

The change was expressed in simple black and white terms and was highly personalised. Among neighbours and associates it became common to bluntly express unflattering sentiments about Berisha. The graffiti from the previous year were so totally ignored that, apart from a rare half-hearted attempt to replace 'PD' with 'PS', they were not even defaced. All the blame was laid at the door of the PD as governing party precisely because it was the government. It made no difference that as late as the autumn of 1996 opposition parties and the opposition press had supported, or not opposed, the pyramid schemes.³⁵ It was the PD that had expressly sought to exploit their popularity to its electoral advantage and paid the price. Many voters showed their displeasure by shifting from PD to PS in the 1997 election.³⁶ The (discredited) 1996 result was almost reversed, and the smaller parties were squeezed still further in the process. Even allowing for the irregularities in 1996 it was a massive shift, but what it shows is less a switch of political opinion than that a large proportion of the electorate consists of 'floating voters', and it is their pragmatic decisions that until now have largely decided the outcome of Albanian elections.

Postscript 1998

A frequent visitor to Albania in the inter-war period, Friedrich Wallisch, remarked that when he committed his observations to paper, he was conscious that he was already '*an der Grenze zwischen aktuellem Bericht und alter Chronik*', on the boundary between topical report and ancient chronicle, as change was so rapid.³⁷ This account is also an ancient chronicle. It is a snapshot of a small part of a convulsion that is now in the past, as it appeared away from the capital, in the heart of the region where it broke out.

Now that the violence has died down, which it eventually did over the winter of 1997 and spring of 1998, it seems almost as if southern Albania has taken up where it left off. People are no longer constantly anxious, traffic has returned to the roads, only a tele-

35. Jochen Blanken, 'Unser Mann in Tirana: Politischer Kommentar', *Albanische Hefte* 26,1 (1997): 12.

36. Lipsius, 'Albanien - ...', 268.

37. Friedrich Wallisch, *Neuland Albanien*, 2nd edition (Stuttgart: Franck'sche, 1931), 110.

vised football match empties the streets at night.³⁸ Many damaged buildings have been repaired, some with international aid, the holes in the blown bridges have been filled in, and the ransacked arms depot in Gjirokastër has been almost completely dismantled so few traces remain of what happened there.

Yet it would be misleading to infer that *nothing* has changed. People do not dwell on the events of 1997, but whenever I reveal that I was in Albania then, the rapport elicited leaves no doubt that the experience has left a mark in people's consciousness. There is still unfinished business and visible reminders are not hard to find. At the entrances to villages large lumps of concrete at the roadside show where there were once road blocks. The water pipe that was cut (see above p.548) has not yet been repaired. More obvious are damaged and ruined buildings, such as the police station in Gjirokastër, a year on only partly repaired, and the gutted hotel in Sarandë that stands gaunt beside the bay. Obelisks at roadsides, hitherto erected to mark fatalities in traffic accidents, have multiplied and can now be found in the streets of towns such as Fier and Sarandë. The victims are young men killed in 1997 or in armed robberies since. The new children's game is robbers, played wearing a mask and holding a toy gun, and the Athens-Tiranë bus is still occasionally robbed. Banks have constant armed police protection and special elite squads escort transport of money between towns. Though illegal arms are not in evidence, there are still many guns at large. A couple of times I heard shots late at night and a young man tried to intimidate me by revealing a small gun discreetly hidden by his sweater. Weapons are constantly confiscated and vehicles are stopped and searched at roadblocks (but people still complain the police do too little).

The pyramid schemes are no longer an issue. Though before the 1997 election politicians were making rash promises that savers would be repaid, it is doubtful if many took them seriously. People resigned themselves to their losses and now manage the best they can with the consequences. The word 'pyramid' is rarely even heard. Foreign accountancy firms are investigating the

38. Field research coincided with France 98, which was probably watched by every Albanian male.

schemes' activities, attempting to untangle the remains of their affairs, but they are otherwise ignored. The physical traces of their existence, like the ruined motel outside Gjirokastër, are little more than the pitiful remains of an illusion. A sign just off the main street in Fier says 'Fondacion Xhaferri 20m'. It leads to a small building in a deserted yard with a larger sign claiming Xhaferri was a charity (*bamirë*) and this was branch number 5. It is locked, barred and has obviously been deserted a long time. Even the modern office of Kamberi in Vlorë (one of just three schemes that did not collapse, but is under investigation) is quiet, if not deserted, and the big sign has the appearance of a relic from the past.

The issue now is prices. Inflation in the year to mid-1998 was 47 percent.³⁹ A survey by European Union monitors of prices of food and everyday items in Gjirokastër suggested an increase of 40 percent in the first half of 1998 alone.⁴⁰ Under pressure from the IMF the government increased taxes and cut items of public expenditure.⁴¹ Public sector salaries, and especially pensions, were held at a low level, the latter at 9000 lek⁴² for a couple per month (though, except during the rebellion, they have always been paid on time), which has caused much discontent. In May 1998 teachers held a one day strike. It is the price people are paying for the rebellion and the economic damage it caused, but that is by no means understood. Though it flies in the face of reason, people continue to look on the state as endowed with money, and accuse politicians of lining their own pockets and giving nothing to the people. The same formulation is repeated time and again. Democratic Party supporters use it to condemn the Socialist-led coalition government, government supporters continue to point to abuses by their predecessors, but most people have had enough of politics after the overheated atmosphere of 1997, and dismiss all politicians as crooks.

The effect of the events of 1997 has been to push the communist period

39. *tvsh* 27 June 1998.

40. Personal communication.

41. Michael Schmidt-Neke, '555 Jahre und ein halbes: Vorläufige Bilanz des Machtwechsels in Albanien', *Südosteuropa* 46,12 (1997): 637.

42. As of June 1998, approximately US \$60.

further back into history. The post-communist era has become more differentiated and has lost the feeling of unreality it had in the early years. The vast experiment⁴³ that has been taking place in Eastern Europe since the fall of communism, has, arguably, been more far-reaching in Albania than anywhere else. The rebellion was only a symptom of problems which are deep, even seemingly intractable. The rebellion may be over, but these underlying problems have yet to be tackled.

43. This is a deliberate reference to the irony of a slogan in the Leipzig demonstrations in 1989, 'Keine Experimente mehr' (No more experiments), the experiment referred to being the communist system. Wolfgang Schneider, ed., *Leipziger Demontagebuch* (Leipzig & Weimar: Gustav Kiepenhauer, 1990), 128, 133. What has happened in Eastern Europe in the few years since then is, arguably, one of the most far-reaching social experiments ever undertaken.