

## WHY THEY SAID 'NO!'

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*After six centuries of tyranny, dictatorship and oppression, Albanians are finding democratic reform a slow and painful business.*

On 6 November 1994, Albanians voted on a new Constitution. The result of the referendum, to the amazement of most observers, was a resounding no. The Albanian electorate had rejected the only democratic Constitution in the history of their country, a charter that, for the first time, would have guaranteed them the basic rights and freedoms which other Europeans have taken for granted for decades.

The new Constitution should normally have been a matter for Albania's Parliament, the *Kuvendi Popullor*, but realising that his Democratic Party did not have the necessary two-thirds majority in the assembly, President Sali Berisha chose to have it passed by popular referendum. This enraged the opposition, but the Democratic Party, under severe pressure from a frustrated and disappointed electorate, were hoping to gain a token of popular approval by the vote on a new democratic Constitution, which, they thought, no freedom-loving voter would dare oppose in its entirety.

It is thus more than apparent that, in their rejection of the draft of 6 November 1994, the Albanian electorate did not vote against the new Constitution - and certainly not against freedom and democracy but simply against the Democratic Party and President Berisha.

Despite this, much credit must be attributed to President Berisha and his Democratic Party. They have opened Albania to the outside world, introduced the foundations of a market economy after decades of socialist mismanagement, and managed to maintain the principles of pluralism and parliamentary democracy in a country lacking democratic traditions. Compared to Russia and many other Eastern-bloc countries, Albania has advanced rapidly in its reforms.

After the fall of the awesome Stalinist dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, Albania was left with a sub-Saharan economy, little intellectual leadership and a culture in ruins. Only in the purest geographical sense was the country a part of Europe. Building a new Albania out of the ruins is not proving much easier than building a new Ethiopia or a new Somalia. Albania is Europe's basket-case and will remain so for some time.

Perhaps the single most important element which caused the referendum to backfire, however, was the campaign itself. Night after night for two weeks, Albanian state television broadcast a deafening propaganda in favour of the Constitution. In the initial days, the 8 PM news was filled with dutiful citizens lauding the president's decision to call a referendum. For a whole week thereafter the nation followed tumultuous scenes of President Berisha on the campaign trail, with a repetition of virtually the same scenario every night: the arrival of the president, populist speeches to the jubilating masses, expressions of loyalty from local mayors and parliamentarians, a visit to the home of a veteran or local dignitary declaring his avid support for the new Constitution, and finally the departure for the next town, amid tears, applause and much waving of flags. Albanian radio and television showed that it was just as servile to the ruling Democratic Party as it had once been to the Party of Labour. Public reaction was bitter and allergic.

Regular viewers have known for some time that Albanian television makes absolutely no endeavour to be impartial. Journalists and broadcasters complain privately about government censorship, about the frequent calls from ministries and people in high places, telling them to broadcast or not to broadcast certain items, but they are powerless to resist. Since state employees in Albania have no job contracts or security, they know full well that

they can be fired for the slightest deviation from the party line. The Opposition rarely gets a say on radio or television.

In the printed media, the situation is entirely different. Here, freedom of the press seems to have no problem asserting itself. The first independent newspaper in post-Communist Albania was *Rilindja Demokratike* (Democratic Rebirth), the voice of the Democratic Party (then in Opposition), which began publication in early 1991. Now dozens of newspapers are published regularly in Tirana, most of them associated with political parties or interest groups. Though the standard of journalism leaves much to be desired, basic freedom of the press seems to prevail.

Of the current Opposition newspapers, the most interesting is *Koha Jonë* (Our Time). The government made a rather clumsy attempt last year to clamp down on *Koha Jonë* when it was still basically a provincial scandal sheet from Lezha. The newspaper's editors, Aleksandër Frangaj and Martin Leka, were arrested and sentenced on 31 January 1994 for 'divulging military secrets.' But the newspaper itself survived and indeed flourished as a result. Since that time, no overt attempt has been made to curb press freedom. The journalistic standards of *Koha Jonë* have improved somewhat in recent months and, despite its stiff price (15 lek, as opposed to 5 lek for *Rilindja Demokratike*), it is the most widely read daily paper in the country. *Rilindja Demokratike* for its part, now the official organ of the ruling party, never succeeded in evolving into a serious, readable periodical (even by modest Albanian standards), such as *Gazeta Shqiptare* (The Albanian Gazette), co-published by an Italian newspaper in Bari, or *Rilindja* (Rebirth), published by the Kosovo Albanian community in exile, with a parallel edition under a different name printed in Prishtina.

Is Albania a democratic country in which human rights and basic freedoms are respected? Yes and no. Much progress has been made in this direction in the last four years, particularly under the influence of the Democratic Party and President Berisha: basic democracy can be said to prevail.

When compared to the more advanced nations of Europe, however, Albanian democracy looks a bit tarnished. With the leader of the opposition, Fatos Nano, languishing in Tepelena Prison, with the Albanian police still renowned for their rural hebetude, brutality and ignorance of civil rights, and with the new secret police, SHIK (National Information Service), opening mail, listening to phone calls and sniffing about in everybody's business, there is cause for concern.

Albania is not a country of long-standing democratic traditions upon which the present generation can rely. Its history is one of tyranny and oppression: five centuries of autocratic Ottoman rule up to 1912; a decade of political chaos; fifteen years (1924-1939) of obscurantist dictatorship under Ahmet Zogu, who in 1928 proclaimed himself 'Zog the First, King of the Albanians'; fascist occupation during World War II; and almost half a century of isolation and unbridled terror under Enver Hoxha's omnipotent and surrealist Party of Labour (1944-1990).

A democratic Constitution, if it can now be passed by Parliament and approved in some form by the electorate, would certainly help consolidate Albania's fledgling democracy and encourage economic growth. A Constitution alone will not suffice, though. The problems facing the country are too overwhelming and urgent. It is doubtful whether any government or political party at the moment could come to terms with them and satisfy the impatient electorate.

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