

ALBANIAN PRINT FREE, NOT TV OR RADIO

by

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On November 6, 1994, Albanians in a referendum rejected the only democratic constitution in the history of their country, a charter that for the first time would have guaranteed them basic rights and freedoms that other Europeans have taken for granted for decades.

Despite the massive rejection, everyone who had read the draft constitution agreed that it was, in general, an excellent work and was well up to contemporary European standards. From the very start, though, the referendum campaign was waged as a political election and was interpreted by all sides as a vote of confidence or no-confidence in the current government.

It is thus more than apparent that, in their rejection, 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 Sali Berisha.

Much credit, however, must be given to Berisha and his Democratic Party. They have opened Albania to the outside world, paved the way for the country's integration into Europe, swiftly 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 devoid of democratic traditions.

Compared to Russia and to many other Eastern bloc countries, Albania has advanced rapidly in its reforms. Still, while the change has been breathtaking, Albania is Europe's basket case and will remain so for some time.

For the Albanian voter, frustration and discontent with the state of the nation, and thus with the government running it, stem from immediate concerns such as mass unemployment or jobs at such low salaries that it is impossible to make ends meet. After the fall of the dictatorship, many Albanians had naive expectations that tiny Albania, with its pristine mountains and sparkling, untouched beaches could become a "second Switzerland" within a matter of years.

Reality has now set in. The lack of jobs and of any perceptible economic growth or foreign investment has created a climate of general despair and bitterness in the population.

Perhaps the single most important element which caused the referendum to backfire was the campaign itself. Night after night for two weeks, Albanian state television broadcast a deafening propaganda in favor of the constitution. Media overkill as its best.

In the initial days, the 8 P.M. news was filled with dutiful citizens lauding the president's decision for a referendum. For a whole week thereafter, the nation, deprived of all other national and international news, followed tumultuous scenes of President Berisha on his campaign trail, with a repetition of virtually the same scenario every night: the arrival of the president in his convoy, 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, amidst tears, applause and much waving of flags.

Albanian radio and television had given definitive proof that it was just as servile to the ruling Democratic Party as it had once been to the communist Party of Labor. Public reaction was bitter and allergic.

The reality behind such organized rallies soon became a topic of open discussion, too.

Attendance had been encouraged by traditional methods. A school teacher from Elbasan, for instance, was forced to sign a document promising that he would attend the local rally with all his pupils. Otherwise he would be transferred to a remote mountain village. Groups and individuals who distributed tracts against the constitution were arrested and severely mishandled by the police.

Regular viewers of Albanian television have known for some time now that this state-run institution makes absolutely no endeavor to be impartial or politically neutral. Journalists and broadcasters lament privately about government censorship, about the frequent calls from ministries and people in high places, telling them to broadcast or not to broadcast certain interviews or footage, 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. As such, the opposition rarely gets a say on radio or television.

In the printed media, the situation is entirely different. Here, freedom of the press would seem 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 the winter of 1991. There are now literally dozens of newspapers published regularly in Tirana, mostly of which are associated with political parties or interest groups.

Though the level of journalism leaves much to be desired, basic freedom of the press seems to prevail. Of the present opposition newspapers, the most interesting is no doubt 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 January 30, 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, although no one would deny that the opposition press is continually harassed. The journalistic standards of Koha Jonë have improved somewhat in recent months and, despite its stiff price (30 lek as opposed to 10 lek for Rilindja Demokratike), it has become by far the most widely read daily newspaper in the country.

Rilindja Demokratike, 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? This answer must be yes and no. Much progress has been made in this direction in the last four years, in particular under the influence of the Democratic Party and of President Berisha. 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 service, SHIK (Shërbim Informativ Kombëtar / 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 long centuries of autocratic Ottoman rule up to 1912, a decade of political chaos, 15 years (1924-1939) of dictatorship under Ahmet Zogu, a landowner and general who on September 1, 1928 proclaimed himself "Zog the First, King of the Albanians," Fascist occupation during the

Second World War and, last but certainly not least, almost half a century of isolation and unbridled terror under Enver Hoxha's surrealist Party of Labor (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 simply too overwhelming and urgent everywhere you look. It is doubtful whether any government or political party in Albania at the moment could come to terms with them and satisfy the impatient electorate.

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