




Weekly Briefing

Albania Political briefing:
Albania's 2018: another political year in limbo

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Introduction

The Albanian political landscape in 2018 was characterized by an always-present antagonism between the ruling force, PS, and the opposition coalition of PD and LSI. The stream of their public discourse had one permanent direction: accusations and counter-accusations. The Socialist Party, with the executive branch under control and the majority of the representatives in the Albanian parliament (75 out of 140) is now deep into the second mandate of governing the country. While the opposition is precipitating in an ever-deepening apathy the government is executing its agenda without any obstacles or liabilities.

The main political actors: narrative, achievements and public opinion

The Socialist Party (PS) is the ruling political formation in Albania, with its leader Edi Rama as the pivotal figure, is trying to present itself as a new driving force for a modern, visionary and West-oriented Albania. On the other hand, in order to be closer to Albanian tradition and national sentiments, the same PS recalled in its program past values, memoirs of nation-building process and historical reference to what is known as the “Albanian National Awakening” period (*Rilindja Kombëtare*). This period of National Revival reminiscences along with electoral campaign promises for welfare, rule of law and fighting unemployment and poverty resonated with the population that went into the ballots with high hopes for better governing body and stability for the country. The propaganda mechanism of PS has been centered into the leader's image and actions and has been very successful in shaping voter's perceptions. However, propaganda is a mean for winning the elections and cannot become a tool of keeping peoples' confidence through time. Besides the programs of modernizing city centers and some very slow-pace reforms (justice and education), it appears that substantial achievements are still to be materialized.

The Democratic Party (PD) with its leader Lulzim Basha, being in opposition since six years, is only promoting the narrative of the connection of government officials to organized crime, corruption and misuse of public funds. This narrative has only been proclaimed in the offices of the same, press releases and media outlets, since no concrete effort has been made to implement those declarations into actual deeds. For the times they tried to gather their supporters and march in the capital, failed miserably. Due to low participation, the pressure towards the government was weak; consequently no tangible result was achieved. It must be mentioned here that Mr. Basha can never escape the shadow of PDs historical leader, Sali

Berisha, who has been one of the promoters of regime change in 1991, a Prime Minister and then President for decades, and is the person responsible for the state failure of 1997, which sent the country on the verge of a civil war. Perhaps this lack of charisma in the new leader is the main reason for losing popular sympathy and election after election.

Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) attempted to implant itself in the political landscape as Center-Left and tried to give an end to the dichotomy of politics in the country. Time and elections demonstrated that they could never be a strong third force, at least not strong enough to be a promoter for change, so, since the very beginning LSI has attached its political weight, supporters and finances, first to the PD, then to PS, then again as of 2018 to PD. This incoherence of views and changing allies has made it lose support; the only political benefit they had was the appointment of their leader, Ilir Meta, as the President of the country. By having this position he could not lead a political party any longer, so the reins of LSI went to his wife.

Media influenced by politics is notable in Albania as a 'Freedom House' report in November 2018 claims. The most important of the media outlets are labeled within the population as leftist or rightist and people tune in to the one or the other according to their political affiliation.

With regard to public opinion inclinations, politics is generally perceived as a tool for personal achievement. In fact, political parties in this "never-ending" Albanian transition, have been a mechanism of job creations and job losses (this was highly intensive during the ruling years of the PD, where thousands of left-leaning individuals were expelled from public service) creating so a deep antagonism within masses. As of 2018, the main components of public discourse are distrust and pessimism; there are no more idealistic affiliations, since left and right agendas and interests many times overlap. It appears that the general public has lost confidence in their representatives. How much this loss of confidence will affect one party or the other will be demonstrated in the next local elections in June 2019.

Overview of main events of 2018

The start of 2018 witnessed a highly acclaimed call for protests in the capital from the PD with declared intentions of overthrowing the government. Indeed, in January 27th, the Democratic Party, which now had joined forces once again with LSI, fled the streets of the capital requiring the Premier's resignation and his ministers dismissed, accusing them of connections to organized crime. Besides the inflated rhetoric and a low participation from citizens, this protest just highlighted the weak popular support for the PD.

Spring was characterized by more precise attacks, this time on a specific member of the government, the Minister of Interior Affairs, Fatmir Xhafaj. These attacks were made public after a tape leaked to the press, on which the brother of the Minister was allegedly engaged in a net of narcotics traffic in Albania and abroad. The same person was found guilty of escaping the Italian Justice, where he was convicted in year 2000. This accusations did not shatter however the political figure of the Minister; on the contrary, he carried on his duty, backed by the expressed support of the Prime Minister Edi Rama and his party. Moreover, some high profile arrests were made under his supervision, where also two members of the Parliament were indicted and arrested.

In May 26th, the PD, once again choose to gather its supporters for a protest in front of the Prime Minister's office, and this time the attendance was even more opaque than the one in January.

The major setback for Albanian politics arrived in late June, when Albania was denied the opening of accession talks with the EU and the process was postponed for June 2019. The decision was formalized in Luxembourg at the meeting held from the General Affairs Council, where France, the Netherlands and Denmark opposed the opening of talks and decided there will be no decision-making for Albania (and Macedonia). For Albania it was required more progress with the Justice Reform, the fight against corruption and organized crime.

In October 27th there was the most surprising move of the political scenario of the country, the Minister of Interior Affairs resigned. Surprising was also the fact that the public came to know of the event via Twitter in a Saturday morning sent out from the Prime Minister himself. In this Tweet he informed the country that he had accepted Xhafaj's resignation with no details about his departure. Interesting is to highlight that to date, there are speculations that the Minister did not resign but was removed from office. This news went viral in a matter of minutes and was internationally covered in matter of hours. All main international media covered the event such as New York Times, Washington Times, Associated Press, Xinhua, Reuters, BBC, etc.

It is commonly believed that the Minister of Interior Affairs in Albania is *de facto* the second most important position in the government. Up to date there are no specific details on why the Minister resigned and this has fueled skeptics on both sides of the aisle on a potential antagonism between Rama and Xhafaj. Yet, everything stands on the grounds of mere allegations.

Final reflections

Albanian politics in 2018 has increasingly become a “One Man Show”. The decision making process is crystallized in the hands of a few selected actors, whom on their side seem always dependent on the Prime Minister’s will. During this year PS had two distinct pillars concerning external and internal affairs: with regard to foreign policy orientation the main aim is the integration into the European Union identified in the opening of Accession Talks. With regards to the domestic agenda, the blueprint of this administration is the Justice Reform identified with the Vetting Process for judges and prosecutors. As of end 2018, the first is postponed and the second is proceeding slowly.

Dialogue missing between government and opposition is affecting crucial issues of national importance, especially the EU integration path. An overpowered political leadership and a lethargic opposition, with no bipartisan decision, are having as a consequence a wave of social aloofness accompanied by overspread distrust for future progress. On the other hand, EU conditionality is affecting every aspect of the political realm and is influencing the decision-making process in every stage. The international factor is dictating when, where and what to prioritize in the domestic agenda. The country is trying to abide to every imposition delivered by the EU and on the other hand there are no tangible advantages for these restrictions. Albanians have agreed to this conditionality for the sake of EU membership. However, it appears that the more is done, the more is demanded; still, political and social patience are being tested while waiting for June 2019.