



Weekly Briefing

Albania political briefing:
The year of political ‘reality check’
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The year of political ‘reality check’

2019 is expected to be an intense political year in Albania. The Local Elections, scheduled to take place the 30th of June 2019, will determine and influence the entire political behavior, actions and reactions. The structures of each party are already in full operational mode and the hard-core militants are prepared to ignite the electoral machinery, together with the lobbying groups by supporting existing or new candidates to the country’s 61 municipalities.

Rama’s governmental jolt

On December 28th Prime Minister Edi Rama dismissed 7 Ministers out of 14 in his government and replaced them with relatively unknown public figures. The Socialist Party’s cabinet underwent a drastic makeover dictated and implemented from Rama himself. The strongman leadership style demonstrated once again the centralization of power in Albanian politics. The ministers dismissed from duty were individually leading Finance, Transport and Infrastructure, Education, Culture, Foreign Affairs, Agriculture and Entrepreneurship/Business Development.

Rama insisted that these changes are not result of failures but a refreshing political move so that the progress will not stall. However, the general perception and media commentaries have a different perspective. The ministers dismissed from office had either alleged corruption accusations or were incapable of carrying out reforms; furthermore, some of the newly nominated ones have already shady deals in their political resume.

Will the renewed government influence sustainable development in 2019?

Last year was characterized by a widespread dissatisfaction with socio-economic policies which led to massive civil protests. The adjustment in key governmental structures will not determine the ongoing of the latter. The name change in key ministries management does not affect immediately the perception and attitude of the civil society towards the Socialist Party in power. The general impression is that this drastic dismissal of important ministers is only a makeover façade in order to accumulate sympathy/ votes in the forthcoming elections.

In 2019, the Socialist Party needs the votes and approval of the majority Albanians more than ever because the wave of distrust and negligence, especially from their own followers, could impact the major municipalities of the country.

The success of a government is measured by the well-being of its people; judging by the economic conditions of Albanian households, the government they voted for and promised to finally end the transition period, failed to meet expectations.

The new ministers will not be able to implement visible change themselves in the cabinets they will preside because the agenda is already set by the Prime Minister.

Local Elections

2019 will be marked by a political struggle of PS, PD and LSI in trying to take the major municipalities in the country. The challenge concerns the main cities where population density and public funding are prominent: Tirana (757.361), Durres (299.989), Elbasan (205.892), Shkoder (200.889), Fier (196.324), Vlora (194.147), and Korca (129.065).

As the figures above indicate more than half of the Albanian population lives in this 7 municipalities and it is in this areas that the power struggle is more aggressive and eventful. The political force controlling these municipalities usually influences the general elections as well, so the stakes are high.

In the previous elections the Socialist Party won (in coalition with LSI), 45 out of 61 municipalities; however, in 2019 the situation has drastically changed. For once, LSI is not any longer in the leftist coalition, the probability of LSI joining the right wing PD is the highest.

The leftist management of the municipalities won by PS and LSI in the past elections has been reckless. Besides the highly acclaimed Urban Revival Program '*Rilindja Urbane*', having at its basis the reconstruction/modernizing of City Centers, no substantial improvements were noted in the last years. A well-functioning municipality is to address such needs as land development, public transport, infrastructure, waste management, sewers and drainage, etc.; the modernizing of a central square does not influence the livelihood of its citizens especially where more urgent and essential needs are incumbent.

Political clientelism - Candidates and their credibility

A recent report from the Albanian Institute of Political Studies (ISP) forecasts for the next elections the departure from the local leadership of some of the well-known mayors, whom are also widely dubbed and accused of corruption, as well as names that have not made headlines in the media or local communities – this is expected to be accompanied by fierce political struggle within the political parties that dominate these municipalities.

Because of the political system implemented, competences in the exercise of the function but also of the clientelistic nature of the government in the country, the position of the mayors

of some important municipalities is *de facto* many times dominant and influential in the party, decision-making, public, media, interest groups, etc., sometimes more relevant than Ministry level officials.

The main political factions within the Socialists and the Democrats have fertilized their testing ground for potential mayors of the future, particularly in the 7 municipalities mentioned above.

There are evidently two possible outcomes:

Scenario 1 - the Socialist Party (PS) wins the majority of the votes

The most probable outcome will be the one of PS winning the elections. Perhaps this will not be as outstanding as the previous elections because it appears impossible to have 45 municipalities on the left once again. The social unrest witnessed lately targeted not only the central government but also the local ones. This dissatisfaction is expected to materialize in opposing votes for the PS, consequently less municipalities under control.

Another logic that extends to this outcome is the fact that the PS will 'win by default'. The opposition is not offering any better platform or visionary candidates, whom could challenge the existing establishment. And last but not least, the Albanian voters are on their majority left leaning; this is demonstrated in almost every free election in Albania since 1991, the Socialists are more active in the voting process and the times when the right wing won, there were either contestations, violent incidents or evident abuse of votes.

Scenario 2 - Democratic Party (PD) in coalition with LSI wins the majority votes

In the unlikely event of the Democratic Party winning the elections, the situation for the government will drastically deteriorate. If the opposition takes the strongholds municipalities (Tirana, Durres, Elbasan, Shkoder, Fier, Vlore, etc.) which are the backbone of the Albanian economy their position and the political capital will upgrade and prepare their ascent into power in 2021.

For as far as the Tirana is concerned, the odds are low for the PD. Erjon Veliaj, a rising star in the Socialist Party is running for the second mandate on being the capital's mayor, and analysts from all spectrums agree that he will be reelected.

The other important areas however are not that certain of voting left again. If there will be a vote swing in Durres and Elbasan it will be only attributed to the political and personal profile of the PD's candidate on these municipalities.

Edi Rama in 2019

Albania's political fate is strongly tied to the Prime Minister Edi Rama and 2019 is not looking bright for this unorthodox leader. He has been 'charming' the international arena with his eccentric attitude and has attracted his peoples' sympathy for quite some time, but this perfect propaganda is not working any longer at home.

According to international reports, his government and bureaucratic apparatus is the more corrupted in Balkans. Because of the combination of some internal and external discontent, the awakening of a new national consciousness and the creation of a front against all politicians; case in point the students' protests which shattered the political scenario at its core. Their protest was not set up against Rama or his government only, their abhor target the entire political class, left and right, setting up so a new, rising type of challenge to the all politicians.

Rama will have to delicately and intensively deal with this situation and chances are that he will fulfill the requirements just to calm down a possible (wider) protests wave.

Within the framework of the Judicial Reform and the Vetting Process, the most inevitable challenge for Edi Rama is SPAK, which is expected to be operative in February. In the spring, the National Bureau of Investigation, Special Prosecution Office and Special Courts will be set up.

These bodies were designed by the US and Brussels to investigate and take over any criminal charge against Albanian rulers since 1991 to date for any crime they might have committed. An American and German team will be deployed to the Bureau of Investigation for a two-year term.

The first investigations will start for declared and hidden assets by September 2019 and arrests, seizures and forfeits are expected.

Another challenge for Rama will be the struggle within the Socialist Party. By all means he is leading his own party with an iron fist; however, factions and interest groups within the PS are evolving and if any of them becomes influential enough they will promptly dare to threat/dismiss the leader.

Final assessments

2019 will mobilize every macro/microelement of political influence in Albania due to the importance of the forthcoming elections. The outcome is important for political influence as well as capital accumulation for the next elections. The municipalities are being used as bargaining mean for businesses and entrepreneurs. This deeply rooted culture of the *quid-pro-quo* has been successful for politicians and entrepreneurs (potential oligarchs).

Will this be the year of Rama's dismissal? Most probably not! Yet again, not because his productivity in office is excellent but because the ascent of PD and LSI (Basha/Kryemadhi) to power would be more fatal for the country. As in the case of the Local Elections, Rama will uphold power by default since there is no better alternative in the political horizon.