



Weekly Briefing

Albania political briefing:

A voting process without real elections – the early aftermath of June 30th

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Introduction

On June 30th Albanians were summoned to vote for the local elections after 4 years; the aim and purpose of this process was to elect the new mayors of 61 municipalities of the country. Differently from every other electoral process this time the opposition did not participate with their candidates by claiming the illegitimacy of the elections. On July 1st, the outcome was clear, the Socialist Party (PS) prevailed; after the votes counting the result turned out to be 60 out of 61 Municipalities won by the PS.

According to this vote Albania now is 98.4% is pro Edi Rama and his political force. For some it is a farce, for some it is meaningless and for the rest it is just as any other election.

Implications and consequences beyond the elections

The political events preceding these elections have been rather turbulent and apprehensive. The consecutive protests of the opposition, their abandonment of the Parliament, the deterioration of violence and social unrest were faced by the government with extraordinary firmness and barricade responsiveness. Edi Rama has been proclaiming for months that the elections would take place and so he made it happen. There were plenty of skeptics who believed that the PS would not go as far as to enter the voting process without the opposition, but Rama proved them wrong. He insisted, persevered, set in motion an entire government machinery to serve this purpose and at the end he realized what he claimed for months – voting for all municipalities on June 30th.

The elections took place and Albanians voted, but what's the real deal?

First and foremost, this is the first voting process in Albania since the fall of the previous regime in 1991 that is being held with only one party running (to be clear there were other candidates from the made-up opposition of the last months, however they are not recognized by their peers).

Second, June the 30th witnessed the lowest participation of the population in a voting process; with the official numbers diffused by government entities at 21.6% and the opposition claims placing the percentage at 15 to 16% of the eligible to vote population. Even if the true number stands somewhere in between (16-21%) it is still the largest boycott to vote from

Albanian citizens ever recorded; it can just be reminded here that the last elections had a participation of 46.8% of the eligible to vote on a national scale.

Thirdly, the risk of too much branches of power, central and local, centralized into a single political force and a single leader, makes the uncertainties of citizens even more severe given the past track of corruption, abuse of public funds, connections to organized crime and ruling deficiencies of the PS in the last six years.

These elections are a novelty in this Albanian transition period. After 29 years of political pluralism there is again a one-party choice for the voters. To the protests of the opposition another loud voice was added as support, the President of the Republic as a person and as the institution he embodies, by promulgating a decree that postponed the elections giving so the bases to the claims of the opposition for illegitimacy of the 30th of June as a date for national voting. This was disregarded however by the government, which is now in the process of instructing the Parliament to proceed in the path of discharging the President from his duties and responsibilities.

The elections *per se* are not the main issue however, the uncertainties related to the aftermath of the processes are what encapsulates the true problematic of this political summer. The elections were held but what will this process entail for the near future? There are three streams of attitude: for the Socialist and their supporters these elections gave the final print of approval from the Albanian people to the Left and Edi Rama. For the Right and their supporters, the path of denial still persists and is the official narrative at every chance given; they deny the process, the event and the outcome. Lastly, there are the indifferent or better say the “uninvolved” which constitute the majority in numbers but have less voice in the decision-making process of one party or the other. To them, their present and their aspirations this does not constitute any change or entices any shred of hope for the future, at the end it is a name change not he change of an era.

To vote or not to vote, this is the question!

As Shakespearean as it may sound, the dilemma of this electoral process was strongly present and real.

Differently from other elections, on June 30th there was an enormous dilemma in the entire population: to vote or not to vote? This is not because Albanians do not cherish and appreciate elections but because of the fact that in this particular circumstance the ones who actually went to ballots were publicly and openly declaring their support and perhaps affiliation for a given political party in this case the PS and the omnipresent leader Edi Rama. Being a highly politicized society for decades, with an overabundance of “fanatic” party-line

individuals this was an event that intensified sense of political belonging and as consequence social divide at a moment when unity is needed the most.

Again, the ones who voted and the ones who didn't, were used as mere numbers from the political establishments of both sides, the government and the opposition. The opposition claims that the ones that didn't vote constitute their political base, in figures, according to the Democratic Party (PD) and the Socialist Movement for Integration (LSI) almost 80% of Albanians that didn't appear at the ballots are against the government and their boycott means no popular support for the PS. For the ruling force, this electoral process was as any other in the pluralism period of Albania by claiming that in every Local election the participation has always been lower compared to the participation in General/National election where the composition of the Parliament is determined. It is evident that both sides are stretching the truth and the numbers to their advantage; first of all, it is a wide known fact that 80% of Albanians do not support the opposition, in fact, the Albanian voters have consistently demonstrated their support for Socialist in many occasions. As of recent years, for example, the left won elections in 2013, 2015 and 2017 – despite of some isolated claims of electoral fraud, still the PS managed to achieve the majority. However, their numbers don't add up to the reality either.

The official statistic again, don't make any sense; for example, according the final voters list published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the General Directorate of Civil Status there are 3,536,015 Albanian citizens entitled to vote in 2019, of which 132,788 voters for the first time; this number is due to the fact that emigrants are counted as voters as well. However, according to another more reliable governmental institute (INSTAT) the entire population of Albania as of January 2019 is 2,862,427 inhabitants, in short there 673,588 voters more than the actual population (which also includes citizens under 18 years old non eligible to vote). According to the same INSTAT there are approximately 700,000 Albanians under the age of 18 years old, thus the real number of voters is nearly 2,161,812 (real population – minors). If the figures are placed into real case scenarios there is a total of **35%** participation in the elections (real population eligible to vote 2,161,812; voted 771,863 on June 30th). Be that as it may, figures aside, even in the best-case scenario when the 35% of the eligible to vote actually voted, this was a political drawback for the Prime Minister and his party.

The International factor attitude towards the Albanian local elections

The entire pre-elections and its outcome cannot be fully understood without mentioning the role and the impact of the foreign influences in Albania, whom for better or for worse, play a determinant part in local politics. Despite the complicated situation and the institutional abnormality, first the United States and after the European Union representatives, all aligned

with Rama and his will to hold elections by all means. This unanimous support for the government and the electoral process was perceived in Tirana as a further downfall for the opposition and their claims.

It is our argument in this stance that on the political perspective, the United States have almost always supported the party in power since the early 1990s, with more or less fervor at times, but mainly that is the line of attitude. The State Department has been clear from the very start of the protests that the boycott is uncommendable or better, unacceptable. Matthew Palmer, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, while visiting Albania and on many other occasions afterwards has vehemently condemned any act of violence during protests and blamed the opposition for excluding themselves from the political system.

Regarding the EU involvement and undivided support for government, it might be a follow up in the course of “carrot and stick” line of action. If the non-opening accession talks with the European Union in June 2019 was a *stick* for Rama and his government, the *carrot* was the fully flagged endorsement of the Prime Minister’s intentions to hold local elections.

Whatever is the reason for supporting these elections, the result is more than plausible and welcomed! These foreign functionaries might have been the only deterrent to escalation of violence and further social unrest in the country.

Conclusions

Is this the beginning of the end for Rama or just the continuation of his unlimited grasp for power and influence? As absurd as it may be in the 21st century, in South-East Europe there is a political party that achieves 98.4% of the total votes. The practical elements of the situation on the ground stretch from shocking to ridiculous and beyond the numbers, all are aware of the charade that took place in June 30th.

As of mid-July 2019, the future is more uncertain than ever. Rama won but himself and his party are well aware of the fact that as easy as this win was, holding up to this new found power will not be a smooth path.