



Weekly Briefing

Albania political briefing:
The fragmentation of the Albanian Right Wing Party
Marsela Musabelliu

The fragmentation of the Albanian Right Wing Party

For decades in Albania Right Wing politics has been the sole domain of the Democratic Party (PD). Its birth sealed the fall of communism and since that day on the joy and pride of this political force has been their cohesion, or at least so it seemed. It is obvious that seven years in opposition have had their toll on the party itself. Usually reckless in their political actions and wholeheartedly attached to power, Albanian democrats (or as they like to call themselves) are special kind of breed which can very well be a bitter combination of anti-socialist sentiment combined with a peculiar Balkan ire. Since 2013, when the PD lost the grip on power, their path to political downfall has been, on the most of it, a matter of their own doing. With the next elections being the only opportunity to restore, it appears that the internal situation is more chaotic than ever, and it has led to a schism which could very well be the end to the Albanian Right as we know it.

A story of subtle internal fractions

The first split within the PD occurred in 1999, initiated by one of their most prominent members, Genc Pollo. However, even if he created a new party, the same remerged with PD in 2009. The next sign of discontent within the PD was made public with the departure of two of their most vocal elements, Gazmend Oketa, former Minister of Defense, along with Bamir Topi, former President of the Republic, whom together in 2012 formed a new party named New Democratic Spirt (FRD). Even if this first fraction made some headlines at the time, the party itself could not win enough votes in order to have any seat in the Parliament.

In 2017, discontent grew within the PD due to a pre-electoral deal of the leader Lulzim Basha with Prime Minister (PM) Edi Rama. As within the party some argued that what happened was no way of handling of affairs, no major fractions occurred. The PD had some struggling times since the loss of the last political elections. Not only the loss in votes was enormous but also its actions as an opposition force have been weak and sluggish. The low number of elected members of the PD in the Albanian Parliament could not affect any change in legislations due to the majority of the votes on the hands of the socialists. The only way they could exert any impact was through media, rallies and boycott of the Parliament; the PD tried them all and yet, no visible change or impact on the political landscape was achieved.

However, the most evident schism was the one of 2019, where the PD decided to abandon the Parliament. Yet, the extreme measure of going out of the system voluntarily, turned into a boomerang for the PD, because not all decided to leave their mandated seats, some of the Members of the Parliament (MP) decided to stay on their duty, disobeying so their leader and *de facto* going out of the party – they called themselves “the new opposition”.

Conspicuous fractions on the rise

Due to fierce internal contradictions, by October 2020 there were five other parties in the Right wing front, and all of them declare that they will run for the next elections with their representatives. The above mentioned FRD; the Democratic Conviction created by Astrit Patozi, former deputy leader of the PD and also former head of its parliamentary group, established in 2019; Albanian Democratic Movement, created in October 2020 by two MP of the “new opposition” and last but not least, Rudina Hajdari, daughter of one of the founders of the PD (later assassinated in 1998) who was expelled by Berisha and Basha from the ranks of the Democratic Party, because she refused to hand over the mandate of MP.

As seen from above, the discontent within the ranks has spurred into channeling of new forms of right wing labels due to internal disputes and/or because of personal inclinations and interests. Usually from their former party, these individuals are seen as “traitors” however, these has not stopped the abovementioned to spill their information, rumors or what they think about their former party.

To add more animosity to the base, in mid-October 2020 the Democratic Party released the list of the future candidates for MP who would be the representatives in the upcoming elections, and no surprise, in the list of the nominees many prominent exponents of the PD were not present. As each of them has a certain base of follower, it is only assumed that if they don't achieve within their own party what they long for, meaning political power, they might as well either join the who already formed a different party or, create their own front.

Former second in command of PD forms (another) new party within the Right

Jozefina Topalli is the first woman Speaker of the Albanian Parliament, Deputy Chair of the Democratic Party and she has been for decades the right hand of the historical leader of the party Sali Berisha. Usually dubbed “the iron lady” of the Albanian Right, her political carrier has been defined either by power, or proximity to power. When her former party held the Executive branch her rhetoric and her attitude towards the opposition (on those times the left Socialist Party) borderline chauvinism it its most basic political concept. The fact that she was fiercely outspoken and pragmatically harsh against the socialists made her almost an “icon” for

the right wing base. Her frictions with the current leader of the PD Basha, started since 2013, but her official abandonment of the party came in 2017. Since that year on, she has been a loud critic of Basha as well as what she called the “new establishment” of her former party.

At the end of October 2020, she presented her new political initiative the "Movement for Change". The former Democratic speaker is convinced that she will not betray the principles of force where she was engaged for more than two decades. She did not spare reserves for attacks she has received, which according to her, are being made by former democrat fellows in order to tarnish her image and new political movement. She did not call it a Political party yet, but she made sure to say that she will be present in the next elections. In 30 years of pluralist history of Albania, few cases like this had quite an impact as her new political movement; with a wave of collective hysteria, her former colleagues condemned her every move. It's about the mission not about power – she would claim in 2012. In a time when she was one of the most critical voices of the people that abandoned the party, ironically, eight years later she is being targeted for the same “sins”.

Some call her a political “hawk” of the democrats, when she was the Speaker of Parliament her discourse was quite terrifying for the opposition. The protégé *par excellence* of former leader of the PD Sali Berisha (perhaps the most draconian political figure of Albania's transition) she used to be his favorite until the new leader, Basha, became the leader of the democrats. It's only fair to say that the former second most powerful person of the PD and the current leader, hate each-other and if they could they would politically obliterate each-other. Basha could make his move in 2017, now Topalli is making hers.

The current dynamics within the PD resembles a saga of political inheritance. The core issue and starting element of this fragmentation within the PD is the “retirement” from the party of the former leader Sali Berisha. Under his authority, no decisive deviations could be implemented within because the leading of the party with an “iron fist” was from the first day to the last, his only style of command. His appointee however does not have the same clout or authority, in many believe that behind Basha there stand a great shadow of Berisha's family, a continuity of power within the clan. The vacuum created within the party appeared insignificant, until the start of the creation of new, legitimized fraction.

Two years ago, a polling was conducted and it was noted that within the democratic base, her discourse had more impact than the one of the leader Basha, so for her to go public against the new leader of her party is extremely problematic for the PD, as well as for their next elections performance.

Conclusions

Could this new political move from the former Speaker of Parliament, Jozefina Topalli, be straw that broke the camel's back (?) – Might be. Whatever the future scenario will be, there is already some irreversible damage: these new party under construction of the former Speaker legitimized the new parties under construction from the ranks of the Democratic Party. The rapid emergence of some new political parties, generally with well-known leaders or figures of the right, has disturbed and moved the political scene and apparently, in the big game that will be played until April 25 next year, namely the general elections, many things will have a different look; furious clashes, accusation and blackmail have already appeared, which most probably will increase in geometric progression, as the election day approaches.