



Weekly Briefing

**Albania political briefing:
Former Minister of Finance and
Deputy PM under investigation for corruption
Marsela Musabelliu**


China-CEE Institute

Kiadó: Kína-KKE Intézet Nonprofit Kft.

Szerkesztésért felelős személy: Ju Weiwei

Kiadásért felelős személy: Feng Zhongping

 1052 Budapest Petőfi Sándor utca 11.

 +36 1 5858 690

 office@china-cee.eu

 china-cee.eu

Former Minister of Finance and Deputy PM under investigation for corruption

Summary

The more elections approach, the more political figures are thrown into the public debate. This year, in only three months, has produced so much news in terms of politicians, that allegations and accusations, bribes, and corruption stories, are the order of the day. In March 2023, it was the turn of one of the most controversial politicians of the last decade, Arben Ahmetaj. This is just another, in a range of a series of corruption cases made public, and it seems there is always someone embezzling public funds. So much so, that all is normalized and has become the new standard. However, the normalization of scandals in a nation is as dreadful as it is dangerous. It makes society numb to reality and makes them feel weak in their relation to political power.

Introduction

Arben Ahmetaj, former deputy-Prime Minister, as well as former Minister of Finance, present in the political scene for decades, is being investigated for four criminal offenses. The accusations include the concealment of wealth or false declaration of wealth; passive corruption; money laundering, and abuse of office. He is a person known to be a good navigator in the muddy waters Albanian of politics and corruption, to the extent that many believe he is the one that brought corruption to an industrial scale in the government. Since 2022, his former boss, Prime Minister (PM) Edi Rama, has distanced himself personally, politically, and legally from Ahmetaj.

The person behind the indictment

The left-wing politician Arben Ahmetaj held the first positions of power with the right-wing party then switched to the left. In 1991, he completed his studies in the English Language at the University of Tirana. He later migrates to Greece and returns in 1992, and served in the Ministry of Finance as an adviser to a right-wing minister. Ahmetaj also went to the US for intensive training. Until 1995, he worked as a Fiscal Advisor at the Bank of Albania.¹ From

¹ Arben Ahmetaj's unknown past at the Democratic Party is revealed, how he hid it in his CV. <https://www.gazeta-shqip.com/aktualitet/zbulohet-e-kaluar-e-panjohur-e-arben-ahmetaj-tek-partia-demokratike--i1205415>

1995-1997, he moved to the USA where he completed his master's studies in "International Trade and Diplomacy", and finally, he obtained an economics degree. From a right-wing politician, he "converted" to a socialist in 1997.

With the socialist government in power, he becomes an important director in the Ministry of Finance, until 1998 when he becomes the General Director of Taxation in Albania, a position he held for only one year but it is considered one of the most problematic times in the history of taxation and the country. Soon afterward (2000) he goes into private practice, he creates a company that becomes one of the most lucrative in the country, and he would win several government bids due to his political connections.

In 2003, he becomes Deputy Minister of Energy and Industry, and in 2005, he left for Romania, (on paper) to pursue a Ph.D., and he transfers the ownership of the very successful company to his wife.

In 2009, he becomes a Member of the Albanian Parliament (MP) and when the Socialist Party comes to power (2013), Edi Rama rewarded him with a cabinet position. He immediately becomes Minister of Economic Development, Trade, and Entrepreneurship in 2013, and in 2017, he becomes Minister of Finance. In 2019, he takes another position as Minister of State for Reconstruction after the devastating earthquake. Later on, he becomes Rama's deputy from 2020 to 2021, with the title Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Albania. In July 2022, PM Edi Rama dismissed him from the duty of Deputy Prime Minister. Arben Ahmetaj is the longest-serving socialist politician in the three mandates of Rama's government until July 2022, when he was suddenly dismissed by Rama himself.

What is known as a "mega-corruption" case

It was a journalist who officially made a criminal complaint in the Special Prosecutor's Office at the Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK). The issue was the incinerators for the treatment of waste, which constitute, according to the investigations, one of the most serious cases of corruption and misuse of public funds in Albania. The construction of the incinerators was opened in December 2014, when the Rama government made a change in the national waste treatment strategy. The change was followed by legal steps to build plants in Albania where waste would be treated through incineration and electricity would be obtained from the incineration.

A year later, the Rama government signed concession contracts for the construction of incinerators in three cities: Elbasan, Fier, and Tirana, with financing through the Private-Public Partnership (PPP) with an initial investment of 178 million euros. The private companies that

won the bid to be part of the PPP turned out to be small, registered offshore, with unknown owners that benefitted from public funds and did not deliver what they had promised namely waste incineration and electricity generation. Public funds continued to flow to the owners of offshore companies who fled when the scandal broke and have been declared internationally wanted by law enforcement agencies. The charges against Ahmetaj are connected to suspicions that he received bribes in the form of travel expenses, 5-star hotel accommodation outside Albania as well as a seaside villa.²

Abuse of office and appropriation of public funds

In 2021, SPAK started investigations into the incinerators, which resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of Lefter Koka, former Minister of the Environment from 2013 to 2017. Former minister Koka was accused of abuse of office, corruption, and money laundering in the two incinerators, in Elbasan and Fier. Together with the former minister Koka, the former socialist MP, Alqi Blako, and nine public employees, accused of corruption, were arrested.

In February 2023, SPAK launched investigations into Ahmetaj. They focused first on the procedure of his granting the concession for the construction of the incinerator in Elbasan when he was a minister in the Ministry of Economic Development. The granting of the concession/bid was done without a proper public announcement and in violation of the law.

At the beginning of March 2023, SPAK administered all the documentation of eight real estates and then imposed preventive seizure on two villas on the coast, one property of his former wife, and one property current partner. Around 30 thousand euros and several documents related to building property were seized.³

The expectations of the citizens towards SPAK to scale up the concrete culture of impunity of officials are high. However, civil society is skeptical. This special prosecution office was created to investigate, discover and punish the crimes of top politicians, and to date, there is nothing worth mentioning.⁴

If the former deputy PM, Ahmetaj is arrested, he will be the third senior politician in the socialist government to go to jail, after the former minister of the interior Saimir Tahiri, and the former minister of the environment Koka.

² The journalist's accusation: How SPAK hid the investigation into the concealment of wealth by Arben Ahmetaj. <https://www.voxnews.al/english/fokus/akuza-e-gazetares-si-spak-fshehu-hetimin-per-fshehje-pasurie-nga-arben-ahm-i35533>

³ Arben Ahmetaj is officially charged by SPAK, these are the three charges. <https://euronews.al/en/arben-ahmetaj-is-officially-charged-by-spak-these-are-the-three-charges/>

⁴ Ibid.

What is not being said publicly

In many believe, albeit without proof, that this downfall of Ahmetaj is a clear distancing of PM Rama from his former deputy. Indeed, Rama has not supported his former friend and altogether has denounced all his potential connections to the Ahmetaj. Yet, one issue remains, could a former deputy PM engage in such a level of corruption without his boss, the PM, knowing? Logically, no. For everything, Ahmetaj has done or has benefited from, logically Rama should have participated or benefited from as well. Yet, there has come a time when this intrinsic duo is not so amicable anymore.

Many believe, that this schism between the PM and his deputy came into life because Ahmetaj “betrayed” Rama. Allegations of such disloyalty go into Ahmetaj being a transmitter of secrets from the government to the opposition. More precisely, Ahmetaj would have divulged confidential information to former president Ilir Meta and his wife, now at the helm of the Freedom Party (PL). It is assumed that when PM Rama came to know about this “extra-governmental affair” he decided that his deputy would have to be dismissed. Indeed, the former president and his wife, being so active in the political scene, have never accused Ahmetaj of anything; on the contrary, they have defended their supposed political adversary.

There is one issue though; Ahmetaj could give up his boss (Rama) and he talked about the potential implication for others in case he is convicted. Indeed, in a public appearance, he stated that one person (himself) cannot do all of what he is accused of, leaving a hidden meaning that all he allegedly did was in concert with the PM, and not a personal endeavor.

Time and again, media and analysts have reported the abuses of office by Ahmetaj, and yet nothing has happened.⁵ What is happening in 2023 seems to be a derivative of an internal struggle between Rama and Ahmetaj rather than a true quest for justice. Indeed, it is curious to see how all the politicians that are indicted or accused by authorities, are being thrown into legal scrutiny only after they are dismissed from duty.

⁵ "The corruption of Arben Ahmetaj" - Secret files and dealings of millions of euros - Inside Story. <https://top-channel.tv/video/korrupsioni-i-arben-ahmetaj-dosjet-sekrete-dhe-aferat-miliona-euro-inside-story/>

Conclusion

The concern for Albanian citizens is that high-level corruption and high-level impunity are a good match in Albania. The system is built in such a way that only the ones with no moral compass become the right people to stay in power. Once they are in power, they can drain public finances as they please.

Albania's finances when Ahmetaj was in charge are some of the worst ever witnessed, as the public debt increased, concessions and PPP increased, and politicians became rich. He is not the one that created this kind of practice, but he is the one that made them acceptable. The issue is that this trend is still ongoing, with people who are quite comfortable with abuse of office and corruption.