



# Weekly Briefing

**Albania political briefing:**  
**Chaotic Parliament, fugitive deputy PM, and justice in the midst**  
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# **Chaotic Parliament, fugitive deputy PM, and justice in the midst**

## **Introduction**

Plato famously wrote, “*The worst form of injustice is pretended justice.*” In recent years, Albanians have come to realize the truth behind this statement as they witness the short-term effects of what is being labeled as the “New Justice.” The justice authorities have taken measures against influential individuals previously considered untouchable, creating political chaos that has deepened the internal divide within the opposition and thrown the ruling party into a circle of suspicion. The Albanian opposition party is weakened, and when a political party is weak, it may struggle to gain recognition, and more often than not, it resorts to creating tension in order to gain attention and make an impact. Justice has stirred some elements of the establishment, and their affliction is impacting the country's political life.

## **A chaotic Parliament and the opposition on fire**

In mid-January 2024, the new parliamentary session started amidst chaos, smoke, and commotion. The Democratic Party (PD) led by Sali Berisha continued with the same power play tactics of the previous year, even though Berisha guided his supporters from home, where he is under house arrest. The President was not allowed to speak in the Parliament as the opposition warned of protests against the Government. The session was interrupted after tensions did not stop. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) was present and later expressed its expectations for a fully functional Parliament that prioritizes necessary reforms, beginning with electoral reform. Despite the good wishes, the statement highlights the challenges of achieving stability in an institution lacking those elements.<sup>i</sup>

At the end of January, because of repeated behavior of inciting violence in Parliament, 18 opposition members were expelled, and there were warnings for others to follow the rules and regulations.<sup>ii</sup> However, this did not deter them; on the contrary, they argue that they represent the will of the people and, as such, their mandate is valid.

At the beginning of February, with a parliamentary session that lasted only 15 minutes, there was chaos again. The initiators, of course, were Members of the Parliament (MPs) close to Sali Berisha, who clashed with the guards and tried to enter by force, and the situation went

physical. In parallel, they gathered their supporters outside of the building. The acts of violence seemed unstoppable, and one of the MPs tried throwing the regulation notebook towards Prime Minister Rama. The MPs, expelled earlier in January and excluded from the plenary session, attempted to enter the hall forcefully. While Berisha's group has warned of chaos in the plenary session and protest outside the Parliament, measures have been taken by law enforcement, with about 500 police officers committed to the smooth running of the protest.<sup>iii</sup> Then, it was the turn of another two members of the opposition to be expelled when the Secretariat of Ethics suspended MPs for 40 days. Lawmakers from the ranks of the opposition blocked the floor of the Assembly and used loudspeakers to stop the progress of a regular session.<sup>iv</sup> These types of scenes are expected to continue in the weeks to come.

The violent incidents inside the Albanian Parliament are just an indication of the ongoing troubles within the opposition. The MPs close to Berisha operate as proxies, with scenes and violent public appearances. They must remain active, vocal, and constantly in the news to maintain relevance. They call for social unrest at every opportunity by organizing protests and urging people to join them. However, their efforts have been largely ineffective so far. The clashes inside the Parliament, whether physical or otherwise, represent another way for the opposition to convey its message: they will not remain silent. The escalation of violence and unrest within the opposition reflects the deepening divide within the country's political landscape. The situation is further complicated because the opposition is struggling to gain traction and support among the general public, which is increasingly disillusioned with the political establishment.

The MPs of the Democratic Party have a multitude of reasons for their behavior, one of which is the need to practice what they preach. By calling for social unrest amongst citizens, they are expected to lead by example. It is imperative for them to be vocal and active to reinvigorate their base and reignite their passion. In their role as representatives of their constituents, they are expected to speak (loud) on the citizens' behalf.

The current behavior of opposition MPs in Albania is influenced also by another crucial factor - the support they need from their international partners. Specifically, the backing of the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) is highly significant. In fact, many of them have even traveled to Washington despite their leader, Berisha, being unwelcomed there. Through their actions in Parliament and on the streets, physical clashes, smoke, and fire, the opposition MPs are trying to signal to their strategic allies outside of Albania that they are still

a force to be reckoned with in national politics. They know that the support of international partners remains a critical element in shaping Albanian opposition and its future. However, how they will reconcile their leadership operations with the United States' anti-Berisha solid stance remains to be seen. Last but not least, they do it for themselves and their power.

### **The saga of a Minister, Deputy Prime Minister, Fugitive, Asylum Seeker and Lobbyist**

Arben Ahmetaj has been at PM Rama's side for a decade. He is a politician who has survived at the head of the departments that circulate money, often labeled as the politician of shady deals. A former English teacher who became Director of Taxation Entity, politician, minister, and manager of Albanians' money. He is accused of corruption, misusing tens of millions of dollars with government contracts, and abuses of earthquake funds.<sup>v</sup> On July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2023, the Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK) requested Ahmetaj's arrest for corruption, money laundering, and concealment of assets in connection with the investigation into the incinerator scandal. He has been a fugitive since August 2023.

In February 2024, Ahmetaj decided to go public and was interviewed in Switzerland, where he applied for asylum.<sup>vi</sup> Albanians know too well that he is a politician who is neither idealistic nor devoted and would not have been able to reach his powerful position if he were. However, some things he said in a much-anticipated interview may hold some value. First, his words reinforce Albanian suspicions and maybe convictions about the degree of corruption of the political establishment. As a fugitive, he decided to speak up, but it is easy to become a “rebel” after losing the support and privileges of power gained from state positions. Ahmetaj turned from the Prime Minister's favorite and confidant to his enemy. He discussed the 60 million euros (€) unaccounted for and suspected of being stolen by important politicians. It is believed he knows where the missing money went but lacks the courage and/or integrity to reveal it, suggesting that justice authorities should investigate further.

Ahmetaj targeted his former boss, the Prime Minister, regarding the current state of the socialists in Albania.

He described a political, business, and media alliance that operates not to serve society but to benefit itself by exchanging favors. For many in the country, his declarations are intellectually weak, morally wretched, and nationally useless. As a member of the ruling elite,

he could not provide straightforward and truthful answers. He made emotional confessions that lacked legal substantiation and factual evidence, which were solely aimed at portraying himself as a victim while paving the path for his political asylum abroad.<sup>vii</sup> Most importantly, this interview was believed to be a veiled political blackmail for Edi Rama and the Mayor of Tirana, Erion Veliaj. He criticized Prime Minister Edi Rama (and some other high officials) by claiming to have reported Albania's government corruption to foreign intelligence services.<sup>viii</sup>

Immediately after this interview, it was made public that he had signed a contract worth \$150,000 with a US lobbying company (Prism Group) to convince the American administration that he was not guilty of corruption and money laundering.<sup>ix</sup> Yet, no Albanian or other authority has sought to arrest him.

Having political power in Albania comes with extended benefits, such as the ability to hire a lobbying firm in the US. By all accounts, this indicates wealth. It is not uncommon for Albanians with significant political clout to hire lobbying firms in the United States to promote their interests and sway American policymakers. This practice alone suggests that the wealthy and influential in Albania are willing to invest substantial resources to advance their agendas. In the case of Ahmetaj, it is survival.

This is a significant development, as the ranks of the Rama-led government are known to be tightly controlled, and no one has dared to speak out against the Party until now, even if it meant facing imprisonment (as was the case with former Interior Minister Saimir Tahiri). Ahmetaj's decision to speak out is expected to have far-reaching consequences and could potentially lead to further revelations about the extent of corruption within Albania's political establishment...or at least this is what Albanians wish.

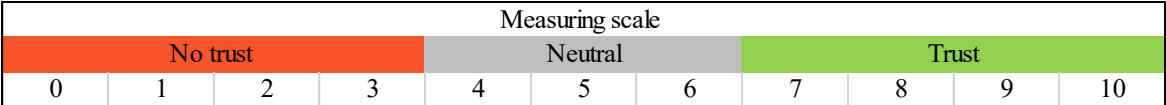
### **Justice, perception, and consequences**

The cases of Ahmetaj and Berisha unite under one umbrella, the "New Justice," and the promoters of the latter label them as success stories. On the other hand, the average Albanian citizen sees it somehow differently. In collaboration with a local institute, an Albanian media outlet conducts frequent surveys on various public interest topics. This survey, referred to as "the barometer," measures citizens' trust in institutions. The latest assessment evaluates the SPAK and its performance, particularly in investigating politically significant cases. It also

considers the impact of such investigations on citizens' perceptions. According to the latest survey, SPAK is currently ranked as one of the most trusted institutions in Albania.

**Question:** how much trust do you have in the following institutions?

United States Embassy in Albania	41.9%
European Union delegation in Albania	34.8%
<b>SPAK , Special Anti-Corruption Structure</b>	<b>33.6%</b>
OSCE	32.8%
State Police	29.5%
The government	27.5%
The president	25.9%
Local government	25.7%
Religious leaders	22.1%
The courts	19.9%
Civil Society (NGOs)	16.1%
Media	17.8%
The parliament	16.8%
The opposition	11.1%
Political parties	8.6%



Source: Barometer, Euronews (own graphic elaboration)

As for every survey, there is much room for a margin of error, especially when asked about current/hot topics in society. Considering the reality of Albania's media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs') inclination, the above figures might be inflated. However, when analyzing what is available, it is seen that citizens continue to have increased confidence in the Special Prosecutor’s Office. Three months prior, when trust in SPAK among citizens was 26.16%, this time, those who believe in the work of SPAK are 33.6% of those asked by the Barometer. However, SPAK is the prosecutor’s office; the courts decide the outcome, and the trust in courts is under 20%. Thus, this is also relative to the matter of the whole perception.

The data in the same reinforcing line speaks about evaluating SPAK’s work, which 56.8% of citizens appreciate. Even for work evaluation, the figures have increased compared to three months ago. Concerning the ones that hold power and the ones in opposition, most citizens believe that the government supports SPAK in its work. 67.2% of the respondents agreed with

the statement, while 26.6% disagreed. When asked if the government can obstruct SPAK's work, 47.7% of the respondents believe it does, while 40.5% do not. In the same question regarding the opposition, the results show that 66.2% of citizens think that the opposition does not support SPAK in its work, and 24.3% think that the opposition supports SPAK in its work.<sup>x</sup> In Albanians' minds, government means Edi Rama, and opposition means Sali Berisha; thus, the above answers are also somehow limited to the centripetal figures of each party.

Historically, or at least in the past three decades, Albanians have had a high degree of perceptive trust in international institutions. For the first time now, an Albanian institution is in the top three of the list. It should also be noted that the justice reform and its related institutions are an initiative of the US and the EU, primarily the US. Although the people working in SPAK are Albanians, most of their training, education, guidelines, and inclinations come from the US. Thus, the success or the failure of the same will impact much on the Western partners supporting it and, consequently, their perception in the public's minds.

The higher level of trust among the public is not solely related to the Justice Reform or SPAK but mainly to the accountability of high-profile individuals such as opposition leader Berisha, who is currently under house arrest, and former deputy prime minister Ahmetaj, who is on the run. This highlights the message that it is no longer possible for anyone to evade accountability - at least as far as the narrative being presented to the public goes. Many believe that SPAK has achieved a significant breakthrough in the past few months, particularly in 2023, by breaking a long-standing taboo that nobody is untouchable. By placing the man who has governed Albania for half of its transition under house arrest, SPAK has sent a message that nobody is safe anymore. This has led to a change in mindset, as those in positions of power may now think twice before engaging in corrupt activities. The hope is that targeting those at the apex of the decision-making structure will deter individuals at lower levels of influence from engaging in corrupt practices. Yet, this is hope; people's lives are not influenced by it but are highly influenced by the lack of proper, timely justice.

### **Justice ...Of the Power, By the Power, For the Power**

Fighting corruption is a critical step towards ensuring a fair and just society. However, it is essential to question whether these efforts are enough to tackle the deep-rooted issues that enable corruption and impunity to thrive. Is this a path towards creating a system that upholds

transparency and accountability and provides true justice for all? As Albania continues to battle corruption and impunity, the ones who pay the price are Albanian citizens.

The recent clashes in Parliament because of Berisha and the troubles created by the former deputy PM have been attributed to a system that is finally showing some results through implementing what is being labeled as the "New Justice." While the rosy labeling of this new initiative may sound impressive, the reality is far more complex and uncertain than what is being portrayed. Despite the widespread support and endorsement of this policy by most analysts nationwide, this new system's actual impact and potential remain unclear. The hype surrounding it does not match its effects on the country and its citizens.

The fact that high-level bureaucrats, directors, deputy ministers, ministers, prime ministers, and presidents are being targeted or placed under arrest and investigated on paper seems to be a high achievement. It makes for good headlines, many public discussions, a starting point for new hopes, and the ever-present question of who will be next to be indicted. Recent developments have provided a compelling narrative for discussions with international partners, particularly in the European Union and the United States. Albanian authorities have proudly presented the "New Justice" outcomes to their endorsing and financing partners (US/EU). Thus, more high-profile arrests, more promotion, and more attention.

When we examine the cases of individuals indicted for corruption, it becomes evident that the most common accusation is "abuse of office." However, the nature of the crimes and the severity of the court sentences vary from case to case. While it is undoubtedly challenging to prove corruption charges involving millions of dollars, there is a widespread sense that all offenders are not receiving appropriate punishment for their actions. The sentences range from one year in jail to three years, including house arrests, fleeing as a fugitive, and seeking political asylum overseas. Despite these penalties, there is still a feeling among the public that the punishment does not fit the crime. This raises the question of why such sentences are being imposed if they are intended to neither punish nor deter future offenders.

There is a growing belief among many people that the Justice System is being exploited to settle political scores and rivalries. The term "political" here refers to the deep-seated power dynamics that extend beyond party affiliations and traditional political divides. It appears that the easiest way to eliminate a political opponent or a rival political faction is by leveling accusations or filing criminal charges against them. This has led to concerns that the legal



system is being misused as a tool for political manipulation and retribution rather than serving its intended purpose of providing justice.

Regardless of the offense committed or the resulting punishment, what is of utmost importance to Albanians is that those who have exploited their political influence are held accountable and removed from power. To clarify, they are not advocating for those charged and sentenced; instead, they believe the punishments are insufficient and may come too late to affect change. An illustrative example is that many judges forced out of the legal system due to their inability to explain their wealth have since become some of the most powerful layers in the country. On the other hand, while Albanians go to jail for not paying their electricity bill, the former deputy prime minister can hire a lobbying firm in the United States!

This glaring double standard has created a sense of frustration and disillusionment among the population. Despite some occasional efforts to tackle organized crime, there has been minimal action taken to seize the goods and assets of those who have stolen millions of dollars from the state coffers. Confiscating assets and stolen funds is essential to achieving justice and accountability. Until such measures are taken, many Albanians fear the country will continue suffering from a culture of corruption and impunity.

## **Conclusion**

The outcomes of this “New Justice” have fueled a struggle that was present before these events and has now taken new heights. Justice is the latest battlefield of the upper echelon of power. Recognizing the role of power dynamics in the pursuit of justice sheds light on the current events in the country. Albanians are accustomed to imbalances because they have been for decades living amid systemic inequalities and, ultimately, injustice. The citizens want to believe in institutions, but their expectations are not high. Over the past three decades, people have learned that wishful thinking does not work for justice or anything else. Albania's judicial reality is far from what its citizens want or deserve.

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