

ALBANIA'S 2011 LOCAL ELECTIONS¹

PRE-ELECTION REPORT No. 2

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Albania's May 8 local elections provide an important opportunity to overcome a longstanding political deadlock that has significantly hampered the country's reforms. The elections also represent a chance for an aspiring European Union (EU) member to improve standards in elections processes, which have been much contested over the post-communist period of the country. International representatives, in line with President Bamir Topi, have appealed for a peaceful and orderly election process. The elections represent a test for Albania's political class and its ability to overcome disputes through constructive dialogue and respect for political institutions.

The Campaigns: Generally Peaceful, High Invective, Episodic Violence

On the eve of May 8, Albania's politically polarized atmosphere remains tense, with the election campaigns filled with mutual recriminations by the ruling Democratic Party (DP) and the leading opposition Socialist Party (SP). The tense atmosphere does not favor a climate of constructive dialogue and debate between candidates, although in certain municipalities around the country issue-based debates are taking place in a calm atmosphere.

The campaigns have included festive political rallies and concerts, but have also been marred by several incidents of violence registered in municipalities including Berat, Durres, Korca, and Pogradec, among others. The incidents involve physical clashes and removal and/or destruction of electoral flags and campaign materials. An explosive was placed in the apartment of a Socialist Party municipal candidate in Tirana, an explosion was recorded near Socialist Party campaign tent in Tirana, and threats were made to the family of a journalist, which he received on air while participating in a television debate about the elections.

The DP and SP have raised accusations against the other party of manipulating the voter lists. For example, the SP accused the DP of manipulating voter lists in boroughs it governs in Tirana, while the DP branch in Durres has accused the incumbent SP mayor of similar deeds.

Albania's principal city in the north, Shkodra, has seen positive examples of peaceful campaigning. Candidates have concentrated their efforts to attract voters by offering policy alternatives. Such positive models are rare. Public debates have not been common in the campaign period, and when they have occurred, most of the debate has centered on

¹*NDI has supported Albania's democratic transition since 1991. Based in Tirana, NDI has worked on democratic election processes, political party development, civic education and issue advocacy, and legislative strengthening. Supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), NDI presently works with politically active women to advance their participation in politics. This report does not necessarily represent the views of the NED.*

personal accusations and wrongdoings rather than a genuine discussion about community issues of concern that presents voters with real alternatives.

The Race for Tirana

Tirana continues as the epicenter of the elections battle—the mayor’s race is the chief barometer of strength between the two political parties.



Campaign posters for Lulzim Basha (DP) and Edi Rama (SP), leading candidates for mayor of Tirana, appear throughout the city.

Lulzim Basha, mayoral candidate of the DP-led *Alliance for the Citizen*, is using an issue-based strategy for his campaign. The DP perceived Basha as the only candidate within the party with a chance of winning a race against three-time incumbent and SP president Edi Rama. Basha has offered his record of achievements in previous positions as minister of foreign affairs; interior; and transport. Some major points of his platforms include lowering local taxes, creating jobs, developing local infrastructure, increasing services to citizens, and fighting corruption.

Basha has stated: *“One of the main priorities of my program is to create 30,000 new jobs during the first two years of my mandate as the mayor of Tirana. I will accomplish this by reducing taxes, providing a guarantee fund, playing an informing role in the labor market, and developing infrastructure. This will bring more money for businesses, more money for employment, and more money for salaries.”*²

Rama has campaigned on local issues, including creating job opportunities, improving traffic, and creating more green areas. However, he has also invited voters to “say no” to the DP’s government, which he holds responsible for the country’s economic problems, unemployment, and corruption. Rama has focused his campaign on previous achievements during his three consecutive mandates as mayor of Tirana, and offers up his mayoralty as the best example of good governance that citizens can observe in the country. While he has centered his campaign mostly in Tirana, Rama has also campaigned around the country in support of other SP candidates running for office.

² *Panorama* newspaper, April 29, 2011.

Rama has declared that he will create 300,000 new jobs, and has stated that, *“this promise is not related only to the municipality of Tirana, but also to all the municipalities that will be ruled by elected socialist candidates. I am committed to fulfilling my promises within the four years of my fourth mandate, not as the mayor of Tirana, nor as the leader of the Socialist party, but as an Albanian who loves his country.”*³

Both candidates have made overly ambitious campaign promises, which might serve to depress turnout, according to some analysts. The tense atmosphere and continued incidents of violence might also deter some citizens from turning out to vote.

Social networking media is playing more of an important role in this campaign than ever before. Basha has garnered more than 278,000 fans on his [Facebook page](#), while Rama has collected more than 120,000 on his [Facebook page](#). Both Basha and Rama claim to be using this forum to learn more about citizen issues and gain feedback from voters while unfolding their electoral platforms.

The Race for Durres

The campaign for mayor of Durres, Albania’s second largest city, is close and with much at stake politically for both sides. The incumbent mayor of Durres is from the SP, as is the case in the country’s large cities of Korca, Gjirokastra, and Vlora, while the DP has stronger support in smaller municipalities and communes--with the exception of Shkodra. Thus, while the DP is trying to win control of this and other larger municipalities, the SP seeks to retain its seat in Durres.

The campaign in Durres illustrates the overall mood throughout the country by showcasing the issues that candidates are running on. The DP candidate for mayor, Ferdinand Xhaferaj, is a former member of parliament and minister of tourism, culture, youth, and sports. Xhaferaj’s platform includes tourism development, transport and commerce, and employment. The incumbent mayor, the SP’s Vangjush Dako, seeks a second mandate to rebuild local roads, develop green spaces, develop tourism, and improve services for citizens. Without credible, independent public opinion polling, absent in Durres and throughout Albania, the candidates are obliged to campaign with little information on how citizens support local issues. The two candidates faced each other in a public debate, which centered on their respective platforms before degenerating toward the end into mutual accusations.

Smaller Parties

Smaller parties running in coalition with the two largest parties, the Democrats and the Socialists, have been actively campaigning around the country. According to the agreements made within the coalitions, the smaller parties are running with their own candidates in areas where they have traditionally had strong support. The Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI), a left-wing party currently in government with the DP and running under the right-wing coalition, has presented its candidates in cities that have traditionally leaned left, with the hope that they can win elections in those areas. For example, the SMI proposed a woman as candidate for mayor in Erseka, who has received the support of the right-wing coalition.

³ *Panorama* newspaper, May 4, 2011.

Among the large number of parties running in the coalitions, only a few have gained visibility during the campaign. These include the Republican Party; Party for Justice, Integration and Unity; G99; Social-Democratic Party; and Social-Democracy Party. The Unity for Human Rights Party, which has chosen to run alone with its own candidates in these elections, has concentrated its campaign in Greek minority areas, where they hope to gain mayoral and local council seats.

The Central Election Commission (CEC) and Election Day Commissioners

The CEC has expressed concern about the parties' repetitive infringement of election deadlines, especially as regards significant delays in the nomination of commissioners for each polling station. All of the political parties with the right to nominate commissioners have failed to submit the names of their secretaries and commissioners for each polling station. The nominations should have been made at least 45 days before election day, allowing the CEC time to train the commissioners – key players in the administration of the election – and ensure a smooth process on election day.

This delay speaks to deep mistrust between parties over mutual concern that, once announced, commissioners could be subject to influence from opposing parties.

In past elections, the CEC has encountered problems when election commissioners have left the polling stations on election day and taken with them official stamps used to certify ballot papers and election materials. Voting was consequently annulled in some of these polling centers. Out of concern that such cases might recur, the CEC has suggested penal prosecution against commissioners who abandon their duties on May 8.

The CEC has proposed having “spare” commissioners available and reserve stamps for each polling station. The spare commissioners would be local teachers. In response to this proposal, the SP-nominated members of the CEC raised concerns about potential election manipulation, fearing fraudulent use of the reserve stamps.

Gender

While the electoral law and a 2008 law on gender equality seek to increase women's representation as candidates in elections and ensure equality in decision-making positions in public institutions, women have largely been excluded as candidates for the 384 mayoral seats, with only 14 women candidates out of 874 mayoral candidates. Compared to the 2007 elections, where 33 of the 1073 mayoral candidates were women, the number of women elected as mayors is likely to decrease as a result. This number is disappointing given that the legal framework to increase women's representation in public office exists in Albania, but is not put into practice.

Legal provisions regarding the election of municipal counselors, however, do carry a gender quota of 30 percent using a so-called “zipper system”, in which every third candidate down the party's list must be of a gender other than the preceding two candidates. Parties have generally complied with this legal provision following considerable pressure from women's groups—including women activists within the parties—to abide by the election code. Some parties have encountered difficulties

implementing this standard at the commune level, reporting that local mentalities against women's political participation left them with a dearth of women candidates.

Overall, the local elections will likely see more women elected to municipal councils, marking a step forward in gender representation in decision-making.

Media

Public attention during the campaign period has been directed to a controversy between several media outlets and the CEC concerning broadcasting campaign videos produced by candidates and parties. The videos in question are not campaign advertisements per se, but rather materials produced by political parties and candidates of their campaign activities. When media outlets are not invited to attend or are unable to cover campaign activities, parties release their own coverage to be broadcast on the news.

Three weeks ago, several television broadcasters issued a public statement committing to professionalism and improved journalism standards during the campaigns. The broadcasters stated they would not air pre-recorded campaign messages from parties or candidates—a common practice in previous elections—during their news programming.

At the suggestion of the Media Monitoring Board, which monitors the implementation of the electoral law in the campaign by public and private news broadcasters, the CEC decreed that such tapes should be broadcast by the television stations. The Board argued that the decision was necessary to ensure equal coverage for all political parties, should the media outlets not have the resources to equitably follow campaign activities.

The television stations argued that airing party-produced videos as news could compromise their professionalism and impartiality by reflecting party propaganda. The Union of Journalists and the Journalists League announced that the CEC's decision would damage their ability to cover the campaigns independently. Being forced to air party and candidate videos would take away their oversight role.

The SP appealed the decision to the Electoral College, a body of the Court of Appeals in Tirana charged with reviewing appeals brought against CEC decisions. The Electoral College overruled the decision on a procedural violation, stating that the decision required a qualified majority of five voters rather than a simple one of four.

Domestic Election Observation Coalition

A coalition of about 900 domestic election observers – led by the Society for Democratic Culture, KRIIK Albania, and Kombinat Center – will monitor election day and the counting process. The domestic election observation coalition has issued two preliminary reports raising concerns over the required or forced participation of the public administration, including teachers and local government employees, in both parties' political rallies. The reports on the pre-election period have also noted that the campaign has been dominated by the leaders of the major parties, leaving little space for the leaders of smaller parties in the respective electoral coalitions.

Some media outlets report that upwards of 1,600 domestic observers may be on the ground on election day.