

ALBANIA'S 2011 LOCAL ELECTIONS¹

PRE-ELECTION REPORT

April 22, 2011

On May 8, Albania's three million registered voters will choose mayors and local councils in 384 municipalities, using a majoritarian system to elect the mayors and a proportional system for the members of the councils.

The local elections risk escalating a longstanding political stand-off between government and opposition that has stalled Albania's democratic transition process and its advancement toward European Union (EU) membership. The campaign is characterized by polarizing rhetoric that could presage undemocratic means to secure undue advantage, produce disputed results, and raise the specter of political violence -- particularly in the wake of opposition demonstrations in January that led to four fatalities and dozens of injuries. Such an outcome would further set Albania back with respect to European integration and democratic advancement.

Accusations of electoral fraud by the opposition Socialist Party (SP) against the ruling coalition, led by the Democratic Party (DP), following parliamentary elections in 2009 precipitated an SP-led boycott of parliament that delayed reform in judicial, public administration, and other key areas required for EU membership. Already a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member, Albania was denied official EU candidate status this past fall, largely owing to concern that the country's political leaders were unable to negotiate a settlement to end the conflict.

Twenty years in to the democratic transition, Albania has yet to hold an election that satisfied international democratic standards, although there has been incremental improvement in such technical areas as voter lists, registration, and identification. Other areas, such as ballot counting and dispute resolution procedures, are in need of improvement. Measurable technical advancements, however, stand in sharp contrast to a harsh political environment in which leading politicians have demonstrated little will to engage in constructive, issue-based campaigning with the aim of resolving the political stalemate.

The elections are a critical democracy test for Albania. A democratic process can enable the country to recover from the political crisis and resurrect its EU membership bid. More particularly, Albania's political class has the chance to show that they can ensure and respect the will of the voters, faithfully execute the law, and demonstrate to citizens that they care about issues that affect everyday life.

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.*

Party Negotiations

The pre-election period to-date shows little sign that the upcoming elections can alleviate the political conflict.

Leading up to the elections, neither pressure from the international community nor sporadic efforts by party leaders to strike agreements have led to formal compromise between the two political camps on election conditions, although the election process has unfolded with the participation of both.

Amidst widespread speculation over whether or not it would boycott the elections, the Socialist Party demanded such transparency initiatives as electronically scanning voter identification cards in polling stations and recounting ballot boxes if fraud is alleged. The DP drafted an agreement of 16 articles on a party code of ethics during the election campaign and on election day. The SP agreed to a few of the articles but claimed that the agreement lacked some of its non-negotiable conditions – including the right to examine ballot boxes if fraud is alleged. Nevertheless, the SP registered for the elections within the deadline, although it failed to submit names of second-level commissioners to the Central Election Commission (CEC) by the deadline. The party finally did nominate its regional commissioners at the end of March. Some speculate that the SP's provisional questioning of the legitimacy of the elections could invite post-election obstructionism that characterized the 2009 post-election period.

Parties and Coalitions

The DP-led coalition of 22 parties, called the Alliance for the Citizen, is running with the slogan, *You Come First*. This coalition presents voters with an ideologically mixed option, since it includes the center-left Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI)² and could potentially disaffect those voters who are staunchly center-right.

Despite speculation of an opposition boycott of the elections, the SP and other left-wing parties have registered to participate. An SP-led coalition of 23 parties, called the Alliance for the Future, is running under the slogan *The Only Way*. This coalition, in comparison to the DP-led coalition, presents a more homogenous ideological orientation to voters.

Smaller left- and right-wing parties with aspirations of winning local council seats have joined the DP and SP coalitions, respectively. Albania's proportional system for municipal councils favors coalitions; smaller parties must join their votes with other parties to increase their chance of winning seats. Some smaller parties and civil society organizations have proposed changes to the electoral system from a district-based proportional to a national proportional system. The DP-SP stalemate has upended efforts to amend the electoral law, although the two parties presumably would not favor changes diminishing their political control. Conflict between the DP

² In January, former SMI Minister of Economy Dritan Prifti released a video allegedly showing SMI president Ilir Meta, then Deputy Prime Minister, encouraging Prifti to sanction a corrupt government financial deal.

and SP notwithstanding, the outcome of these elections may further consolidate Albania's emerging two-party system.

Reports of the candidate selection process from both sides of the political spectrum have indicated that, in some cases, the process was neither transparent nor inclusive. Selections occurred behind closed doors, without competition, provoking disappointment among many long-time party members and activists who aspire to elected office.

The campaign is now in full-swing, long on political invective, short on policy and issue debates. There are no reliable independent opinion polls to measure voter sentiment; anecdotal evidence suggests widespread public apathy. Voter turnout has trended downward in past local elections (53 percent in 2003, 47 percent in 2007), and may be further dampened, putting pressure on both coalitions to turn out their respective bases of support.

The Race for Tirana

For many, the political struggle of the past two years will be played out between the SP and DP in the race for mayor of Tirana. According to many political analysts, the race is close. Edi Rama, SP president and incumbent Tirana mayor, is seeking a fourth term, after victories over DP opponents in the three previous cycles. Rama is running on his Tirana record and also with a view to retaining, as mayor, a platform as a political leader at the national level, given the capital's overriding prominence. In this vein, Rama's campaign has focused on attacking the DP and its candidates. The SP has made it clear that these elections will be a national test of strength for both parties after a two-year power struggle.

The DP candidate, Lulzim Basha, resigned from his positions as an MP and minister of interior to run for mayor. Basha is focusing his campaign on issues of importance to voters, conducting such activities as door-to-door meetings with voters. Basha has shied away from a character attack on Rama and instead discussed a number of issues that he would address as mayor, including employment, the environment, education, and infrastructure. Efforts like these indicate that Basha is trying to prevent the Tirana race from focusing on the longstanding DP-SP conflict and, as least as concerns the race in Tirana, he is joined by Prime Minister Sali Berisha.

The battle has begun online as well, with Basha and Rama racing to gain fans on their Facebook pages. Basha, thus far, has more than 160,000 fans, while Rama trails with only just more than 80,000. While this online battle may not be a prediction of the electoral outcome, it does show that Basha is having more success, at least in this venue, connecting with voters.

Election Violence

April has seen an increase in inter-party tensions and an increasing number of violent incidents reported each day from throughout the country is beginning to raise serious concerns over the stability of the electoral process. For example, in Balldren commune in northern Albania, a DP candidate, Zef Doci, was shot while driving in the commune center. A separate incident involving SMI activists and the Tirana municipal police occurred when an argument over the placement of campaign materials ended with a municipal policeman being shot. Many other

incidents have been registered in communes and municipalities including Berat, Kamza, Kashar, Korça, Petrele, Pogradec, Tirana, and Vlora. Fortunately, there have been no casualties.

Civil Society/Domestic Election Monitoring

Civil society has been unable to produce independent voices calling for the two political parties to bring an end to the stalemate and start listening to citizens' interests. Often seen as politicized or coerced, many civic groups struggle to provide independent evaluations of government and political party actions in the election process. The 2009 parliamentary elections drained civil society of many of its leaders as parties tempted them with positions on their candidate lists or posts in government. In some cases, when civil society leaders returned to their organizations after having supported a specific political party, the credibility of their organizations as independent was brought into question. When civil society has managed to raise its voice, it has found very little space to intervene and is too often cast aside as negligible.

With international assistance, a coalition of NGOs – primarily led by the Society for Democratic Culture, KRIIK Albania, and the Kombinat Center for Women and Children – is to monitor the election process and provide voter education to the public. These NGOs monitored elections in 2007 and 2009, and their post-election reports, which were widely reported in the media, contributed to the public's understanding of the conduct of the election process. Domestic observers will be joined by 400 short-term international observers on election day.

Gender

Civic groups are putting pressure on parties to respect the electoral law's gender quota provision for local councils, which requires that, in local elections, every third name down the candidate list should belong to the gender opposite to that of the prior two candidates. Sanctions for ignoring the gender quota provision amount to a negligible fine of \$300. The number of women running for mayoral positions is low, with only 17 candidates for the 384 mayoral posts. Better respect for the gender quota leading to more women in local councils would be an important step forward in the long battle for improving gender representation in decision-making positions.

There have been public calls by many NGOs, including the Women Network's for Equality in Decision Making, for electoral reform in several areas that would support higher levels of women's representation, such as harsher sanctions to ensure that quotas are respected for elections.

The Central Election Commission

The work of the CEC has been hamstrung by political disagreements. The SP-nominated CEC members boycotted the Commission for three months, protesting what they alleged as decisions made without their consent. They recently resumed their official duties, though politically charged debates continue to threaten the CEC's impartiality substantively and perceptibly. The SP successfully appealed a CEC's decision on the format of the ballot paper, which would have listed the parties in the DPs coalition but not in the SP group. Delays based on the appeals process have prompted concerns that the ballot papers may not be ready in time for the elections.