


<p>The Opposition and Opposition Activity in Albania During 1920-1924</p>		<p>History</p> <p>Keywords: civil society, Albania during (1920-1924), political parties “The Folks’ Party” and “The Progressive Party”, the Albanian Parliament, etc.</p>
--	--	--

<p>Albana Mema</p>	<p>Center for Albanian Studies Institute of History Sheshi “Nënë Tereza”, Tirana, Albania</p>
---------------------------	--

<p>Abstract</p> <p>In this paper have been indicated some aspects of the civil society in Albania during the state building (1920-1924), by focusing on the Albanian opposition of the time. Using the literature based research methodology we could find the elements that have marked the civil and political culture of these years. In the early 1920s, there were two main groups in the political life in Albania, apparently irreconcilable, which characterized the Albanian society: “The Folks’ Party” and “The Progressive Party”. They could not be considered political parties in the Western sense; however, both presented identical vague programs supporting reform, education and the material development of the country. Following the independence the political class did not have enough competence for the foundation of a modern state. In a community without schools or educational system for a hundred years, there can’t be any elite capable of governing. Basically the political class was composed of elements from the high feudal class or from the administration. The Parliament was divided into two groups: the conservatives organized by the Folks’ Party and the Progressive Party. The groups didn’t have any ideology to support, or any organizational structure. Both groups were fighting to get governmental power.</p>

The Albanian Parliament was the main institution of defining the contemporary politics of state during 1920-1924. In this period were set up and established the constitutional state institutions. Important were the first elections, the set up of political groupings and their parliamentary activity. This development brought about the parliamentary opposition and the publication of the first editions in the field of constitutional law.

As commonly known The National Assembly which came out of Lushnja Congress didn’t operate on the basis of parliamentary groups and alternative competition but on the basis of a common platform of country’s political leading. Only in fall 1920 the political war in the National Council would get more intense and the first political parties of parliamentary origin would emerge. Out of the Government’s and Assembly’s activity was shaped the institution of opposition.

The creation of oppositional groups in the representative organs such as the Parliament or the Senate are naturally essential and functional characteristics of parliamentary regimes. But what was most problematic in Albania was the fact that these groupings were not created as a result of political stratification within the country, but set up on the basis of regional belonging and personal connections.

It is obvious that the situation of the representative institutions was really fluid and that the level of political and state building responsibility of the Albanian elite was low. The lack of a deep understanding of politics and national institutions, the incapability to establish a political consensus, to understand the need for stabilization of state and national institutions etc. were significant negative features of the political elite of the time.

During this period as a result of the political war in the country the new election law passed and the first parliamentary elections took place. In these elections “Partia Popullore” (The Folks’ Party) was presented as an electoral subject with a quite well drawn up program. In the mean time a group of MP-s that opposed Fan Noli and Ahmet Zogu created a new political force called “Partia Përparimtare (Demokratike) Shqiptare” (The Progressive (Democratic) Albanian Party).

But “The Folks’ Party” and “The Progressive Party” were not created and didn’t function as parties nether in structure, nor in their activity. None of them made it to set up parliamentary structures and to realize an electoral process within. What formed their identity as political forces was the identification with the names of their leaders.

After the dissolution of the two main parties the political system in Albania underwent full restructuring. The two ex-leaders of “The Folks’ Party”, Ahmet Zogu and Fan Noli, were now, only after two years of cooperation, at the head of the two rival camps.

Because of conflicts within the party Zogu decided to leave the first grouping to build a new political force named “Partia Popullore” (The Folks’ Party otherwise called The Governmental Party) or the Conservative Association “Klika” (The Clique). “The Progressive Party” was dissolved. Now the political forces of Parliament were: “The reformed Folks’ Party” and the opposition. But still the Albanian opposition members didn’t make it to form a real parliamentary party of the Western kind.

As it was evident, the conclusion of the 1921 elections didn’t bring about the required political stability in the country, within six months many governments were changed.

As a result of a probable jeopardy and this for the first time in the political history of Albania, in October 1921 a broad political coalition was established between the position and opposition, known as “Bashkimi i Shenjtë” (The Holy Union). But this coalition would be temporary. Soon enough it would lead the way to a long and deep institutional crisis. Sejfi Vllamasi writes that “the parliamentary situation didn’t allow the opposition party to build a government, as it didn’t have the majority. Thus they thought of establishing “Bashkimi i Shenjtë” (The Holy Union).” Despite the absurdity of this idea “The Folks’ Party” accepted the creation of this committee out of which emerged the Government of Pandeli Vangjeli, which within a short period of time was overthrown by a coup d’état. Part of this conspiracy were: The High Council (Aqif Pasha and Luigj Bumçi), Q. Koculi, H. Prishtina, M. Kruja and the whole uprising opposition.³⁶ This was a wrong and dangerous start of the first Albanian opposition.

“After the failure of the coup d’état the oppositional coalition began to prepare an upheaval under the mask of the election of a constitutional assembly. This upheaval was done by the extremist part of the opposition. M. Kruja and Z. Dibra, the most daring vanguards of the opposition, elements in possession of influence like B. Curri involved by mistake, Elez Jusufi, Hamit Toptani representing the big landowners and Halit Lleshi, a tool in Yugoslavia’s service. All of them were united to overthrow the government, even though having different purposes.”³⁷

“The period following the resignation of Delvina cabinet has been a period accompanied by coups and uprisings by the end of which the party of public order and reason won fully over the party of chaos and that of foreigners’ tools.”³⁸

The same idea is given by the General Report of the Commission of Inquiry on the 12th of 1922 which explains that: “As the powers of the Regents were not clearly defined in the Lushnia Constitution, the result is frequent complications, such as the constitutional crisis in December.” The abovementioned report attributes this severe occurrence, that is the coup d’état, to the low level and the limited possibilities that the Albanian society had to adapt such a regime. In his opinion: “Accordingly, political struggles are almost always rivalries, which owing to the customs and character of Albanians are often likely to degenerate into armed conflict.

³⁶ Sejfi Vllamasi, *Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri 1897-1942*, Tiranë: Neraida, 2000, f. 408-409.

³⁷ Sejfi Vllamasi, *Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri 1897-1942...*, f. 409-410.

³⁸ Sejfi Vllamasi, *Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri 1897-1942...*, f. 280.

The power of the politician is still measured less by the number of his electors than by the number of armed men at his disposal.”³⁹

The new parliament was gathered in April 1921, even though it was foreseen to be created after the Constitutional Assembly and not before. At this time the gathering of a Constitutional Assembly was impossible, because the international position of Albania was unclear. It would become clear only by the end of 1921, after the final verdict of the Ambassadors’ Conference. Still the parliament was of less importance, as the main fight lay in cabinet level, fighting to gain control over the crucial positions and the luxury created by the political power.

“In fact between the end of 1921 and the final resignation of Zogu in March 1924 Albania had only two cabinets and one relatively free and fair election for the Constitutional Assembly in fall 1923.”⁴⁰ During this time took place even the institutional development of opposition activity. The opposition made many correct and valuable remarks against the way of governing and put forth many ideas and projects on modernizing Albania and its progress. Among the variety of oppositional groups articulating Western ideas and projects stood out the most liberal group lead by Noli and followed by Stavro Vinjau, Loni Kristo, Kristo Kirka etc. who essentially formed the *vatran* group (after the name of the association “*Vatra*”). But unfortunately the opposition activity as well as its rational and progressive elements inherited even negative characteristics related to the political culture and experience as well as to the occurrences of the past. Thus the denigrating fight in parliament which got more and more wild was combined with the fight done by oppositional organs of the press. It was lead by Fan Noli, Luigj Gurakuqi, Stavro Vinjau and Ali Këlcyra and occasionally Mehdi Frashëri and Koço Tasi became part of it too. These were the leaders of the opposition which had joined each-other for nothing but the overthrowing of the government. In this parliamentary battle the party of the majority made it to keep discipline and its self-control for a certain period of time. It respected the opposition so much without interrupting its speech during negotiations that according to Vllamasi’s statement “this surprised even the foreign diplomatic corps’ representatives.”⁴¹

“Most of the deputies, out of their yearning to see the people on a higher level, thought that this level could be achieved quickly by giving to an undeveloped people the greatest freedoms of a democratic society. Because of this situation green light was given to the highfliers, so that they could deceit the people and make out of it a tool of their illegitimate goals. And indeed, this is what happened, the opposition in Parliament as well as in the press did its very best until it gave way to the destruction of the situation which had entered the road to stabilization and by the end of 1923 the stable situation came to an end, after the majority was destroyed which had been a strong guarantee of the future, whereas the state fell into incapable hands of the high culture element.”⁴²

Vllamasi has also stressed the lack of good will of the opposition to cooperate with the governing majority under those difficult circumstances. He admits that: “The declination of a part of the opposition to cooperate with the majority which under extremely difficult circumstances built and stabilized the state on modern basis willingly or unwillingly resulted as a severe mistake with destructing aftermath for that time. A part of the opposition not only didn’t cooperate, but also fought out of revenge and eagerness to career against the majority up to destruction and became the root of cause for letting the state in a chaotic situation.”

³⁹ The British National Archives (TNA), Foreign Office (from now on: FO) 371/7329, p. 285-293, General Report of the Commission of Inquiry of the League of Nations, 12th of April 1922.

⁴⁰ Austin, C. Robert, *Shtegu i pashkelur i Fan Nolit*, Tiranë: Albin, 2003, f. 54-55.

⁴¹ Sejfi Vllamasi, *Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri 1897-1942...*, f. 309-310.

⁴² Sejfi Vllamasi, *Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri 1897-1942...*, f. 285-286.

Even though it is not to be viewed as a final definition and completely real it is interesting to see how Sejfi Vllamasi portrays the goals of the opposition. He writes that: “part of the opposition, like Luigj Gurakuqi etc. fought this war to substitute the policy of Congress to a pro-Italian one. The second part of the opposition fought this war to come to power and to create privileged positions, like for instance Qazim Koculi and Ali Këlcyra. The third part was the one not realizing properly the situation of the country, not knowing very well the people dealing with politics and their goals such as Shuk Gurakuqi, Luigj Gurakuqi’s and Mustafa Kruja’s tool, Bahri Omari, Rasim Babameto, Dhimitër Kacimbros, Kristaq Kirka, Loni Kristo etc. influenced by Faik Konica, Fan Noli and by being unclear regarding the real judgment of the situation.”⁴³

Just like Vllamasi, even Bajram Xhafa has stated that the move of the opposition for new elections of the Constitutional Assembly right after the failure of the coup was not motivated by principal motives of defining the form of regime and the consolidation of state, but only by the hope that by new elections they would achieve the goal of coming to power. “After failing to come to power by a coup d’état out of political intrigues some of the heads of the opposition didn’t give up trying to achieve their goal using extreme methods of violence, the armed rebellion.”⁴⁴

More or less this was stated even by the Commission of Inquiry in the League of Nations which since the 27th of February “called attention to the fact conditions in Albania were still far from settled, that there was a growing opposition directed against its Government, whose policy of forcibly disarming the population had caused considerable resentment, and that rumours were circulating to the effect that active opposition was being organised in Puka region by a chieftain named Bajram Zuri. It seems that at the beginning of March this movement spread to the province of the Drin, when several influential chiefs, headed by a certain Elez Yussuf, formed the plan of marching on Tirana and overthrowing the Government. They appeared to have followed no definite political purpose, but to have been inspired, as is generally the case in these insurrectionary movements, solely by motives of personal ambition.”⁴⁵

In the elections of 1923 took part a great number of parties and political groupings. But none of these parties had extended all over the country’s territory; the party system of this period was fragmented. According to the well known scholar R. Austin, the opposition was deeply divided and didn’t have a common and clear political program on the future of the country. The only thing uniting these groups was the animosity against Zog and the eagerness to come to power. Eventually these groups lead a common campaign as Partia e Opozitës (Party of the Opposition) to which belonged the Liberals of Noli, the Democrats based in Gjirokastra, “Ora e Maleve” (The Mountains Fairy) from Shkodra and the National Democrats based in Vlora.⁴⁶

A problem that has lead to many discussions and contradictions be it in the years 1920-1924 or later on by historiography was also the system of elections applied in this period. The election’s system was assailed by the opposition of the time and later on by historians for its undemocratic character. But it has to be pointed out that these authors never did analyze this question in the respect of cultural, infrastructural and institutional possibilities Albania had to apply a direct electoral system. Just like the other institutions set up during this period, the institution of elections has also to be analyzed within the historical period it acted in, evaluating in this way all the institutional solutions the time offered.

Whereas Vllamasi gives this frame of the competing groups. According to him “in the electoral war the country was divided as follows: 1) Zogu with the new party; 2) The members of the ex-National Wing and of the

⁴³ Sejfi Vllamasi, *Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri 1897-1942...*, f. 327-328.

⁴⁴ Bajram Xhafa, *Historia e Shqipërisë 1912-1939*, Shkodër: 2006, f. 248.

⁴⁵ FO 371/7329, p. 380-382, Complementary Report of the Commission of Inquiry in Albania, 13th of May.

⁴⁶ Austin, C. Robert, *Shtegu i pashkelur i Fan Nolit...*, f. 57-58.

Folks' Party; 3) The majority of the ex-motley opposition; 4) The Association "Bashkimi" (The Union) which was composed of young patriots."⁴⁷

In the bosom of the Constitutional Assembly was fought a cruel political fight between the government and the opposition. The opposition appealed for radical political and economic reforms, it considered the government of Ahmet Zogu as illegitimate because it governed despite of not really having won the elections. Now the opposition was aware of the improbability to oust the government by free elections. Thus it frankly didn't accept the results and decided that the overthrowing of Zogu from power called for alternative measurements. But according to Austin: despite the complaints of the opposition the results of the elections corresponded to the political reality."⁴⁸

The Assembly of January the 21st 1924 tried to pass the main questions hoping to come to a final verdict on the governing form, to decide on setting the capital and finally to pass to the elections for the new parliament. Still the opposition was not interested in moving these questions forward. Eventually the Assembly was never able to solve the problems the country was facing.⁴⁹

If we take a look at the opposition's requests during this whole period and to what it achieved when it came to power in 1924, we will make it to define how real have been its electoral promises. When the opposition came to power it didn't manage to apply the democratization of the country, it didn't reform the electoral system, the elections didn't even take place. This showed that its requests were premature at a time when the state had not made it to set up powerful state institutions.

This idea is supported even by Eno Trimcev which articulates that: "In the period of the Albanian "democracy" 1920-1924 both political parties had a liberal Western program. That democracy failed, this is not surprising, this country wasn't ready yet. Until then the poorest country in Europe, Albania, was not able to set up powerful state institutions, let alone legitimate institutions and powerful democratic ones."⁵⁰

According to Vllamasi "the duty of the parliamentary opposition consists in picking out the mistakes of the government, in reprimanding it and bringing it to book when necessary. All of this is done to the country's interest. To the same interest it tries to overthrow the government by legal means and to come to power itself to apply its program. This is the mission of an opposition's deputy and not to fight the government by slandering and other means not corresponding to the dignity of being a deputy."⁵¹

The elections which aimed at declaring a period of state establishment, just worsened the situation even further because there was no hope of uniting the main political groups of the country.

"The Constitutional Assembly actually didn't do anything, a fact which made the opposition stronger."⁵² But if this was a good omen for the opposition which now had decided to give voice to its challenge against the government outside of the institutions, in fact it was a bad omen for the interests of the country, because it evidenced that the crisis was taking an irreversible direction and the boycotted institutions of the country were coming rather too close to the abyss of dissolution.

It seems that the only reasons of the uprising have been envy and the political egoism, the unwillingness to play the role of a peaceful and constructive opposition and above all the unlimited eagerness to come to

⁴⁷ Sejfi Vllamasi, *Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri 1897-1942...*, f. 334-335.

⁴⁸ Austin, C. Robert, *Shtegu i pashkelur i Fan Nolit...*, f. 64.

⁴⁹ Austin, C. Robert, *Shtegu i pashkelur i Fan Nolit...*, f. 65.

⁵⁰ Eno Trimcev, *Democracy, Intellectuals and the State* (The Case of Albania), Tiranë: AIIS, 2005, f. 55.

⁵¹ Sejfi Vllamasi, *Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri 1897-1942...*, f. 411-412.

⁵² Austin, C. Robert, *Shtegu i pashkelur i Fan Nolit...*, f. 80-81.

power, so that each group realized its political ambition, even the personal revenge against the opponents. What the opposition members of 1924 didn't ever take into consideration was the risk this civil conflict brought into Albania to the existence of the Albanian state and to the process of its consolidation.

The constitutional problem in Albania has become subject of the final Report of the Commission of Inquiry. J. Sederholm writes: "Parliamentarism in the Western sense of the word, with direct general suffrage does not seem for the present suited to Albania with her heterogeneous population, containing a majority of illiterates, and in which a form of feudalism is still prevalent over large areas." According to this report: "It is necessary to have a strong central government, although at the same time allowing the different provinces a certain measure of local administration. To find the proper balance between the decentralisation will be one of the most important problems for Albanian statesmen."⁵³

During 1924 unfortunately the main Albanian political institutions: the Parliament, the High Council and the Government didn't make it to cooperate with each-other in finding a long-term solution and avoiding the crisis that had befallen the Albanian state.

The immaturity of the Albanian political class and especially that of the opposition which placed the party and ideological objectives before the national ones and even worse the unbending egoism for power of many individuals of the political class of the time made the political process undergo great shocks and this would lead the way to an authoritarian governing which would evidence that under the given circumstances it could be the only way of realizing the process of consolidation and modernization of state and national institutions.

⁵³ FO 371/8531, p. 035-041, The final report of the Commission of Inquiry in Albania, J. J. Sederholm.