

Boçi, Sonila

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FRONTI DEMOKRATIK

THE DECEMBER 2ND, 1945 ALBANIAN ELECTIONS:

Legitimization, or Mere Formalization for Communist Power?

Sonila Boçi



Post-communist Albanian society is currently engaged in several debates over the communist regime's entry into power. The most involved debate concerns the legitimacy of the Communists' power. Sociologists and political scientists consider a political regime legitimate when the people under its rule believe it deserves their loyalty (Tarifa 2008: 27). Subjectively, political systems or governments can be considered legitimate when they are accepted by their citizens. In other words, their degree of legitimacy depends on the people's confidence that the government has the moral right to seek and earn their obedience. My intention here is not to engage in a theoretical analysis of the meaning of legitimacy; rather, with respect to the above definition, I would like to discuss whether the December 1945 elections gave the Communists' regime legitimacy, or simply formalized their power.

The rapid road to power

Albania belongs among those Balkan countries where the Communists took a rapid road to power¹. That is: the Albanian Communists, like their Yugoslav counterparts, designed and implemented their platform for arrival in power already during their resistance activities in World War II.

In a resolution at the meeting that established the Communist Party of Albania (CPA) on November 8, 1941, the Albanian Communists anticipated as their long-term plan the creation of a "people's democratic government" (Dokumente 1971: 26). Following the Comintern's directives on September 16th, 1942 for the establishment of a National Anti-Fascist Front², the Communists

¹ *Albanian communist as their Yugoslav counterpart came to power without the foreign assistance* (Lory 2007).

² After Nazi Germany attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, J. V. Stalin called a meeting with George Dimitrov, General Secretary of the Comintern. The latter received instructions on the new policy to be adopted by the world communist movement. On July 1941, the Comintern sent all communist parties directives instructing them to interrupt

were the main instigators and organizers of the Front's Peza Conference³. Their domination of the General Anti-Fascist National Liberation Council and the regional National Liberation Councils was

the global Socialist revolution and make efforts to establish National Anti-fascist Fronts, which were to include all social classes. These Fronts' purpose would be to fight against the German invaders as a precondition for the protection of the USSR. The CPA, though not yet recognized by the Comintern, was informed of the Comintern's general directives by nearby Yugoslav envoys Dušan Mugoša and Miladin Popović. See: Lalaj, A. Konferenca e Bujanit, 31 dhjetor 1943-2 janar 1944, një analizë e rivlerësuar. In: *Studime Historike*, nr. 1-2, Tiranë 2011, p. 145.

³ Peza is a village about 18 km away from Tirana, the Albanian capital. At the beginning of the Italian invasion of Albania, this village formed the nucleus for the armed resistance against the invaders. On 16 September 1942, at the CPA's initiative, it hosted a conference with the participation of CPA representatives and many other—non-communist—personalities: Abas Kupi, Ndoc Çoba, Kamber Qafmolla, etc. The most important decision at this conference was the establishment of a movement for the struggle against the invaders. This movement was later turned into an organization called the National Liberation Front (NLF). The resolution approved at the conclusion of the conference stated that all Albanians who wanted to resist the

Introductory picture

Ballot boxes: on the right is the ballot box with the picture of DF candidate on it that would collect all the votes/balls in favor of Democratic Front. On the left it is the so-called black box (the box without a candidate) that would collect all the votes against the Front.
Photo: ATSH, Politika, 1945.

* Balli Kombëtar (National Front) and Legaliteti (Legality) were both anti-communist organizations. The first had a republican inclination, whereas the second was loyal to the monarchy and the monarch (Zog I). Regarding their attitudes towards the occupation armies: Balli Kombëtar was willing to cooperate with the occupation forces. Legaliteti, on the other hand, tried very hard to pursue the road of resistance. British military missions tried to help this organization undertake action against the invaders, but it failed. Its small number of followers was the first reason for this failure. The second was that Legality's leader, Abaz Kupi was sure that will come the time to fight for the political power. Thus, he pursued the policy of preserving forces for the future clash against the partisan movement.

Dr. Sonila Boçi

Author is a researcher at the Institute of History, Center for Albanian Studies. She also teaches as part-time professor in Faculty of History, University of Tirana. She is the author of the book „Minorities in Albania between identity and integration 1939–1949“. She has written several articles on Albania during communist regime.

sonilaboci23@gmail.com
Center for Albanian Studies,
sheshi Nene Tereza, nr. 3, Tirana, Albania

the step that secured them affirmation, popular support, and the enhancement of their credentials in the eyes of the Allies as the main force of the Albanian resistance.

The change to the international situation after Italy's capitulation in 1943 gave Albanian, Greek, and Yugoslav communists a clearer hope for a road to power. The civil war ensuing from the Labinot Conference and the denunciation of the Mukja Meeting ended with the political elimination of rival organizations “Balli Kombëtar” (the National Front—“National Front” below) and “Lëvizja e Legalitetit” (the Legality Movement—“Legality” below)*.

After this, the Albanian communist leaders worked their way into power. At the Permet Congress on May 24th, 1944, decisions were made, among others, to set up the General Committee, which would function as a provisional government; to ignore all Albanian governments in exile; and to prohibit King Zog's return to Albania.

These decisions gave the Communists the opportunity to create the provisional government on their own. On June 25th, 1944, by order of the General Command of the National Liberation Army, the partisans crossed the Shkumbin River⁴. By the end of this operation, they breached the areas held by King Zog's supporters, forcing the Legality leaders to leave the country. They also managed to defeat northern leaders such as the Kryeziu Brothers and Muharrem Bajraktari, known for having resisted the invaders.

The Democratic Provisional Government of Albania, created on October 23rd, 1944 by the Second Meeting of the Anti-Fascist National Liberation Council in Berat, comprised only members of the National Anti-fascist Front. Its formation was the last stage in CPA's de facto takeover.

But a government must meet two prerequisites in order to be legitimate: it must show that it is the lawful representative of its citizens by coming to power through free and democratic elections, and it must secure international recognition. The Provisional Government that emerged from the Berat Meeting had not yet met either of them.

Yalta: the birth of the obligation for free elections

At the Yalta Conference in February of 1945, the U.S., Great Britain, and the USSR took important decisions with the goals of restoring peace in the world after World War II and defeating the remnants of Fascism. In order to achieve these goals, the Conference proposed measures to form provisional governments “broadly representative of all domestic elements in the population and pledged to the earliest possible establishment through free election of government responsive to the will of the people; and [...] (d) to facilitate where necessary the holding of such elections”⁵ in all European countries.

enemy, “regardless of their religion, region, and political views for a free and democratic Albania,” could join the National Liberation Front.

⁴ For more information on the actions of the National Liberation Army against the northern regions that supported legalists and bajraktars (local leaders) in Mat, Krujë, Dibër, etc., see: Amery 2002: 246–249; Butka 2006: 379–381.

⁵ Foreign Relations of the United States Diplomatic Papers (further: FRUS), The Conference at Malta and Yalta (1945), edited by United States Department of

The Albanian communists had already formed a provisional government. But, in contrast with the Yalta provisions and the events in other countries of the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe—where coalition governments had formed—the Albanian provisional government comprised only members of the Anti-Fascist National Liberation Front, which was completely in the hands of the CPA. There were several reasons for the absence of a coalition government. Firstly, the Allies had not recognized any of the Albanian governments in exile. A civil war had eliminated Legality and the National Front, whom CPA had attacked on the pretext that they were collaborators. Some of their leaders had fled abroad, some were waiting to appear at the “People’s Courts,” and others had run to the mountains with the hope of organizing a resistance against the Front’s government. Secondly, Albania, unlike other Balkan countries, had no strong tradition of multiparty parliamentarianism. Thirdly, the country’s weak economic development and social structure had not favored the creation of any leftist social-democratic or peasant parties with whom the Albanian communists could collaborate as other communist Eastern European parties had.

The Albanian government had to fulfill Yalta’s last condition and thus organize general elections. This was the only way to obtain the Allies’ support for not only the Communists’ takeover, but also the very existence of Albania as a state. The international situation of the Albanian government and state in 1945 could be curtly summarized as “dangerous.” The Albanian provisional government was not invited to participate at the UN’s founding conference in San Francisco, preventing its initial acceptance into this organization. This government was not recognized by any countries other than Yugoslavia. Greece continued to exert pressure on the Western Allies and the UN for recognition of Greek territorial claims in southern Albania. The Greek government had added strategic elements to its rhetoric on what it called the “Greek ethnic structure of Northern Epirus,” as well as the persecution of Albania’s Greek minority by the Communist-led government (Boçi 2012: 173–186). In short, the enflamed international arena made the Allies’ support for the Albanian provisional government a necessity.

In the spring of 1945, the Allies’ military and civilian missions arrived in Albania. Their purpose

State, Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1967, p. 972; Conte 1994: 189.

was to report on the national situation in order to prepare for the recognition of the Albanian government by their respective states.

At the end of this process, they presented their views on the further steps needed for the recognition of the Albanian provisional government. Judging from the reports submitted by the representatives of Great Britain and the United States, we can see that the Western Allies clearly understood the provisional government’s pro-Moscow policy, but were faced with the reality that this government was the country’s only organized administration. In a communication with his headquarters on September 3rd, 1945, Colonel Warner, the leader of the British Military Liaison in Tirana, states that the UK should recognize the NLF regime because there is no other alternative to this regime⁶. The Western Allies had a split opinion on the immediate recognition of the Albanian provisional government. According to the British Foreign Office, the immediate recognition of the Albanian government would “strengthen its internal positions.”⁷ This is the reason why the British Foreign Office thought that “if we are to recognize [the Albanian government—S.B.], I think we should impose some conditions on which we will have to agree with the US government beforehand. At least, we should insist on free elections, for what it might be worth it, and we could also ask to be given the promise of a general amnesty.”⁸ But the British and American allies did not have identical opinions regarding the recognition of the Albanian government.⁹

The Western Allies were concerned that the Soviets would unilaterally recognize the Albanian provisional government. Aiming to support pro-Western elements in the Front and hoping to prevent complete Soviet control over Albania,

⁶ The National Archive (later: TNA), Foreign Office (later: FO)/371/48083/63818/R 14916.

⁷ TNA, FO/371/48083/63818/R 14916.

⁸ TNA, FO/371/48083/63818/R 14916.

⁹ The representative of the American civil mission, Jacobs, unlike his British colleague, thought that there were several reasons why the Allies had to recognize the Albanian government. First, he said, the parallels drawn between the communist-controlled governments in Romania and Bulgaria and the one in Albania were not accurate. According to Jacobs, the Albanian communists were different as they had come to power without Soviet interference. Second, the Allies had facilitated the Albanian communists’ takeover via their assistance during the war. Third, “it would be futile to expect that democratic principles are conceived by any Albanian government the way they are understood in Western Europe. Albania is much more undeveloped than Bulgaria and Romania and we should not insist on observing democratic principles.”



Catholic priests judged as members of the organization *Bashkimi Shqiptar* (Union of Albanians) heading the courtroom, Shkoder 1945.
Photo: ATSH, *Gjyqet e popullit*, 1945.

they thus reconsidered their stance towards recognizing the Albanian government.

On October 4, 1945, British and American representatives met to re-discuss recognition of the Albanian government. The common opinion was to provide immediate recognition to the Albanian provisional government as a preventive measure against its total dependence on Yugoslavia,¹⁰ but to also rely, meanwhile, on Yalta's Declaration on Liberated Europe.¹¹

On November 10th, 1945, the Western Allies' concerns proved true: the USSR officially recognized the Albanian government. The governments of Great Britain and the United States issued a statement that same day for its provisional recognition. They reported that official recognition would be accorded after the fulfillment of two conditions: that free and democratic elections be held, and that Western journalists' presence be accepted during the campaign and on Election Day.¹²

Faced with this pressure, the Albanian provisional government had no other choice but to take

¹⁰ United States National Archive (later: USNA), 875.01/10-1645, James Clement Dunn's report for the State Department: minutes of the negotiations between American and British representatives on the recognition of Albania, date: October 16th, 1945.

¹¹ USNA, 875.01/10-1645, James Clement Dunn's report for the State Department: minutes of negotiations between American and British representatives on the recognition of Albania, date: October 16th, 1945.

¹² USNA, 875.01/11-801, telegram no. 99 sent by the Foreign Office to the U.S. State Department, with its text recognizing the Albanian administration as a provisional government, November 9th, 1945.

all the measures necessary to arrange both elections and its victory in them, while preserving at least a semblance of free and democratic elections.

The provisional government on the eve of the elections: propaganda, violence, and a legal framework

During the war, the Communists had promised that at its end, Albanians would be free to express their preference on the country's form of regime. The proclamation of the provisional government formed in Berat promised, among other things, that: "after the country's liberation and after having stabilized the situation, there will be held free democratic elections for the Constituent Assembly" (Nosi 1980: 30).

The CPA leaders clearly understood the importance of the elections, and above all, the importance of winning them. They would be the CPA's passport to both legalizing their power and becoming free to undertake all the measures needed to establish and consolidate the future regime. During the period from December 1944 to December 2nd, 1945, the CPA performed a few tasks that would help it to win the elections.

The first of these tasks was to take measures to strengthen the government's position. The leaders of the Albanian Communist Party adapted a very cautious policy. They tried to utilize everything they had available. They took quick action to overcome the many difficulties facing their so recently war-torn country. Their purpose here was to gain

the trust of the lowest social strata and to show them: “this is his power.”¹³ Much work was done to rebuild the public facilities destroyed during the war. Social assistance committees were established to help the families affected by the war. On the other hand, since help had to be provided by the people and not the state, commissions had to develop propaganda to increase solidarity among the people (Dokumente 1971: 295). The Central Committee of the Communist Party of Albania constantly emphasized the importance of including propaganda in any work done by the commissions. The measures to boost the people’s confidence in the provisional government also included a campaign for the reduction of certain taxes. Particular importance was given in the CPA-controlled press to the propagation of the Agrarian Reform (Fisher 2004: 328). Its implementation had been promised to the Albanians right after their independence, but it had never been put into practice. Despite its many initial weaknesses, the reform’s implementation increased the number of Front supporters.

Meanwhile the Communists needed to eliminate those who could block their present and future plans. In other words, their political opponents. These could be divided into two categories. The first consisted of National Front (that is, Balli Kombëtar) and Legality members who had remained in Albania and continued armed resistance against the Communists. The second consisted of the vast majority of the middle and upper classes, who stood against the Communists’ promised social and political changes because they saw in them the destruction of private property and free enterprise. Further opposition to communism came from the large percentage of intellectuals who had studied abroad and sought the installation of a liberal democracy in Albania. Meanwhile, northern Albanians and their leaders were also skeptical about the CPA and communism. Being “conservative, closely linked to their land and committed to traditional customs, including religion (Pipa 2007: 28), they perceived in communism the risk of changing their way of life.” We can infer from this analysis that the Communists were not standing on solid ground—that their support base in Albanian society was too weak.

At the Berat Meeting, Enver Hoxha had declared: “There would be punished whoever was

involved in fascist or pro-fascist activities” (Hoxha 1971: 375). But the CPA’s conception of fascist and pro-fascist groups included all people who opposed the provisional government’s reforms (Hoxha 1971: 375).

The CPA’s leaders did not apply the same policy towards all political opponents. They were fairly ruthless towards a few in order to intimidate the rest. They engaged in fierce direct combat and propaganda against those they considered their most outspoken opponents: Balli Kombëtar’s partisans and King Zog’s supporters. The brigades of the National Liberation Army were involved in chasing down these groups, and heavy fighting took place throughout Albania. These armed conflicts ultimately brought great losses to CPA’s opponents. They were accompanied by murders, arrests, and often extrajudicial executions.¹⁴

“War criminal” trials were another method used to eliminate and intimidate political opponents.¹⁵ On December 6th, 1944, a law for the identification and conviction of war criminals was passed. On December 28, 1944, CPA’s Central Committee instructed all of CPA’s district committees to create commissions for identifying people as “war criminals,” because there was no accurate information on who might be considered as one (Dokumente 1971: 295). “War criminal” arrests began that same month. In March of 1945, a special trial against war criminals was opened in the “Kosova” cinema hall in Tirana. 19 out of the 60 defendants were sentenced to death. Those death sentences were carried out for 17 of them; the rest received heavy sentences.¹⁶ This special trial was but the first in a long series of such trials. The special court’s judicial panel was headed by the Minister of Interior Affairs (Koci Xoxe), and it generally consisted of incompetent persons who visibly issued politically biased sentences.

The CPA’s second task, closely related to the first, was to strengthen and reshape the Anti-fascist National Liberation Front. The Front was a vast organization built to include the majority

¹⁴ For a complete overview of the conflicts between Anti-fascist National Liberation Army brigades and the bands of fighters opposing the Communists, see: Dyrmishi 2003: 31–86.

¹⁵ The identification, arrest, and conviction of war criminals was a part of Europe’s denazification process after World War II. The Albanian Communists used this process as a tool to eliminate political opponents—side-by-side with real war criminals and collaborators.

¹⁶ Arkivi i Ministrisë së Brendshme (later: AMB), Fondi i dosjeve gjyqësore, V. 1945, D. 1568.

¹³ In all of the CPA leaders’ correspondence with “ground-level” Communists during 1944–1945, the phrase “we need to show to the people that this is his power” was repeated constantly.

of those who wished to fight for the liberation of Albania. But after that liberation, the CPA, having managed to take over the Front's leadership, used it for other missions. As in wartime, the CPA continued to remain semi-underground. Most of the population neither knew nor could understand what communism and the CPA had to offer. Hiding within the Front, it was easier for the CPA to achieve its strategic goals in a population with poor cultural and political awareness. Primarily by maintaining their semi-illegality within the Front, which was the most extensive organization in the country, the CPA prevented the delineation of other parties both inside and outside Albania's borders.

The election campaign for the Anti-fascist National Liberation Councils was launched in April 1945. It served to create a nationwide foundation for local governance by the CPA. Two tasks were of primary importance: "cleaning out" elements unfavorable to the CPA that were left over from the wartime councils, and setting up Anti-fascist National Liberation Councils in the areas that had not supported the Anti-fascist National Liberation Front during the war.¹⁷ The campaign for the election of Anti-fascist National Liberation Councils faced strong opposition in northern Albania. Dretoria e Mbrojtjes së Popullit (the People's Defense Directory)¹⁸, fearing an armed response from this population, undertook a vast disarmament campaign.¹⁹ The reports of CPA's district committees in northern Albania clearly show the use of violence in a variety of regions, such as Peshkopi, Shkodër, Mirditë, Pukë, and Mat, in order to force the people to obey the Communists.²⁰ However, even though they formed the basis for the new regime's local government, the Communists never managed to fully control the northern population.

¹⁷ The testimonials of the Tirana-based foreign missions regarding the elections of the Anti-fascist National Liberation Councils are quite interesting. Elections in the major cities were held at neighborhood meetings, where only supporters of the Anti-fascist National Liberation Front were selected. Council members were elected with non-secret voting, i.e. all participants raised their fists to vote. Not once was an alternative candidate proposed, or a proposed candidate rejected.

¹⁸ The People's Defense Directory was the intelligence service that preceded the ill-famed Sigurimi i Shtetit (State Security).

¹⁹ Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit (later: AQSH), F. 14/Arkivi i Partisë (later: AP) strukturat, V. 1945, D. 2, fl. 7.

²⁰ AQSH, F. 14/AP strukturat, V. 1945, D. 2, Fl. 7. This file includes reports from the CPA's district committees in Peshkopi, Kukës, Scutari, etc. They clearly show the problems encountered by communist leaders in these areas, as well as those leaders' harsh reactions towards northerners.

Having laid the foundations for local government, communist leaders then focused on organizing the former National Liberation Front into a purely political organization. The campaign for the selection of delegates to the Congress of the Anti-fascist National Liberation Front began in July of 1945. In the circular that CPA's Central Committee sent to lower committees, to the Communist Youth of Albania (CYA), and to military divisions throughout the country, it ordered that communists devote particular attention to this campaign. "The Congress of the Front"—stated the circular—"must demonstrate the nation's political unity in the line of the Front" (Dokumente 1971: 319). The circular also provided instructions regarding the Front's delegates. CPA leaders recommended that communists "[w]ork so that most of the delegates are CPA members, more than half of them are people close to us, and the others should be elements that will be drawn towards us by being delegates and by working with us" (Dokumente 1971: 321). What was propagated as a free campaign among the people was in reality firmly under CPA control. The available documentation clearly shows that the CPA continuously gave orders that the whole campaign be conducted in the name of the Front.

The congress of the Anti-fascist National Liberation Front began its work on August 3rd, 1945. It was largely controlled by the Communists and their supporters. However, there were also anti-communists who, being unable to organize their own political party, had decided to enter the Front. After having secured a strong position within the Front, now called the Democratic Front, the CPA had paved its way to its third task: arranging the election, that is, drafting election laws, scheduling the election, and starting the election campaign.

A meeting of the Anti-fascist National Liberation Council was held on September 27th–29th of 1945. For three consecutive days, the Council discussed and approved a package of laws to regulate the coming elections. This package consisted of the Law on the Constitutional Assembly, the Election Law, and the Law on Voter Lists.

The Law on the Constitutional Assembly sanctioned as the Assembly's tasks: to decide on the form of the regime, and to approve the status of the Albanian state.

The Election Law laid out all electoral processes and provided for direct, universal suffrage—avoiding the indirect-voting system that had been used

between the wars. It also gave Albania's women the right to vote²¹. However, Article 4 of this law was in contradiction with the principle of general elections, because it provided that "[t]he right to vote in the elections is given to those citizens who are eligible under the Law on Voter Lists."²² The law also recognized the right of other parties and independent candidates to run for elections if they managed to collect enough signatures—20 for independent candidates, or 70 for political parties.²³ However the law did not provide for the creation and legalization of the political parties and organizations that would participate in the elections. The absence of a special law on these made it impossible to implement the abovementioned articles in the Albanian elections. Meanwhile, the law had some gaps to prevent candidates unwanted by CPA leaders. The election commission had 48 hours from the day of a candidate's registration to verify their eligibility to run. At the end of this period, the Commission was to reject a candidate if it was verified that the people petitioning in his support had been denied the right to vote. Another weakness of the Election Law was the way the whole process was managed. It was administered by the Central Election Commission and district election commissions. The chairman, the secretary, and five members of the Central Election Commission were elected by the Anti-fascist National Liberation Council, whereas the appointments to the district commissions were made by the Central Election Commission on the recommendation of the prefectural Executive Committee. The responsibility for supervising the polling station, under this law, was assigned to the chairman of the district's "Front Council." Thus, the entire voting administration process was in the hands of the Anti-fascist National Liberation Council. The Law did not outline how these representatives' work should be done. In this situation—where the CPA's keen supporters populated the district councils—the voting process could never be considered transparent or honest. The law did meanwhile have provisions about how, physically, votes should be cast. Given the nation's widespread illiteracy, the Election Law relied on the use of "voting balls."²⁴

²¹ Law no. 124, date: September 28, 1945, "On the election of the people's representatives in the Constituent Assembly." In: *Gazeta Zyrtare* no. 54, October 1, 1945.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ According to article 43 of the law on the election of representatives to the Constitutional Assembly, voting would

The true democrats in the Democratic Front Council realized that the law was far from the era's Western democratic standards and, more importantly, was inappropriate for the country's circumstances. In the discussion preceding the passing of the law, Gjergj Kokoshi—an Anti-fascist Council member who was also the Minister of Education—stressed that the law did not adhere to democratic principles and declared his vote against it. He felt that wartime was over with the end of the war, and that the time had now arrived for the educated and qualified people who would contribute to the country's development.²⁵ However, the Election Law, he said, did not "give equal opportunities to those [educated people—S.B.] who, because of their political beliefs, did not want to participate in the Front, but who could have been very valuable for the future of the country."²⁶ This law provided for the Front's absolute victory in the elections even without the people's support, because: first, it did not give political groups or candidates outside the Front enough time to organize so that they could win, and second, the Front had all the conceivable means of promotion under its control. Gjergj Kokoshi's greatest concern was that the candidates outside the Front would not be competing with a political organization, but with a state governmental machine.

The Election Law was still far from the CPA's true political philosophy. Its principles, had they truly been implemented, would have led to a multiparty democratic model of governance, which ran counter to the CPA's vision of democracy. For the CPA, democracy did not mean a multiparty system and free elections. It had no intention of sharing its power with anyone else or accepting a regime different from the one it planned. In its propaganda, CPA explained to the masses that there were "two types of democracies." The first tolerated all types of parties—even fascist parties. Whereas the democracy offered by the Commu-

be performed as follows: *When a voter picks up the voting ball, they hold it either in their left or right hand; if they do not have a right hand, they close their fist and, with their fist closed, they go to every ballot box and put their hand in every box. The ball is to be dropped in the box that contains the list or the candidate they want to vote for. When they take their hand out of the last box, they open their hand so that everyone can see that it is empty. During the voting, the chairman or other council members take great care to prevent voters from voting with their other hand, or leaving with the ball.*

²⁵ Fjala e prof. Gjergj Kokoshit në Mbledhjen e KANÇ-it. In: *Bashkimi*, September 28th, 1945.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

nists “constituted a strong barrier against fascism... If there are people who consider this democracy a dictatorship, we say that a dictatorship that attacks fascism and gives all the rights and freedoms to people is the broadest democracy that exists in these circumstances.”²⁷ This is the reason why the CPA’s Central Committee recommended to the district committees that, rather than popularizing the election’s democratic principles during the campaign, they popularize “its spirit,”²⁸ i.e. the idea that the elections would be free.

The CPA found mechanisms to minimize the effects of the Election Law on its victory. It achieved this via the Law on Voter Lists. Many of this law’s articles openly attacked the principles on which the Election Law was based—especially that of universal suffrage. Article 4 of the Law on Voters Lists denied the right to vote to several groups of Albanian citizens: ministers and state officials at the time of the invasion, political fugitives, war criminals, and “the nation’s enemies.”²⁹

This law lacked clear definitions and criteria for what was meant by each of these categories, leaving the CPA room to exclude all political opponents from the voting process. The exclusionary character of Article 4 was even highlighted in a report by the British representative in Tirana, where it is stated: “There are very few Albanians, who have had nothing to do with Zog’s supporters, Italians, Balli Kombëtar, Legaliteti, or the law.”³⁰ In this way, the commissions drafting the lists could exclude anyone they considered an opponent.

Meanwhile paragraph 2 of Article 4 of the Law on Voters Lists provided for excluding from the voting process “war criminals and people’s enemies and any other person sentenced by the military or special courts with life imprisonment and thus losing every civil or political right forever...,”³¹ (i.e. persons for whom there was a court decision). But officials went even beyond the law’s provisions, and voter lists left out every person on war-criminal lists—even those for whom there was no court decision to prove their guilt. Foreign missions had to continuously demand inclu-

sion in the voter lists for even such individuals as those who had fled abroad or to the mountains but had maintained the status of Albanian citizens.

In order to increase the number of the voters supporting its regime, the CPA lists of candidates for the assembly included people who had great authority in their areas, yet did not support communism. This was most evident in Shkodër, Kukës, and Peshkopi—the areas where anticommunist opposition was strongest. Therefore, on the recommendation of the Central Committee, the candidate list included even Selim Jegeni, a man who was very influential in his area but had not been allowed to participate in the District Committee or the Liberation movement led by the Communists. In other words, he was an anticommunist.³² The CPA also mounted a large propaganda campaign to convince influential district “Baryaktars” and rich peasants to support the Front’s candidates.³³

The election campaign: a “missing” opposition, CPA dominance

Under a decision by the Central Election Commission, the campaign was to start on November 7th, 1945, but it actually began on October 15th instead, with rallies that the CPA’s district committees organized in all districts. The start of the campaign set both the CPA and the anti-communist opposition into motion. The latter’s disorganization, weakness, and disunity constituted the Communists’ greatest hope for victory. In addition to the lack of a tradition of party pluralism, the Communists’ policy of intimidation had hampered the organizing of a political opposition.

However, part of the opposition had still begun organizing. Thus “Bashkimi Shqiptar” (Albanian Union) was formed in Shkodër in April of 1945. This organization consisted mainly of the Catholic clergy. In the fall of 1945, the Monarchy Group, the Resistance Group, and the Social-democratic Group joined forces to form “Bashkimi Demokratik” (Democratic Union). It was headed by Gjergj Kokoshi, mentioned earlier in this article, who had by then resigned from the General Council of the Democratic Front. None of these groups were legally recognized as opposition parties. The CPA’s position in this regard was quite clear: “We (CPA)

²⁷ Fjala e prof. Sejfulla Malëshovës në Mbledhjen e KANÇ-it. In: *Bashkimi*, September 27th, 1945.

²⁸ AQSH, F. 14/AP strukturë, V. 1945, D. 147, fl. 7.

²⁹ Law no. 125, date: 29.9.1945, “On Voter Lists.” In: *Gazeta Zyrtare* no. 54, October 1, 1945.

³⁰ TNA, FO 371/48085/63888, British Military Mission’s report on the development of the election campaign in Albania.

³¹ Law no. 125, date: 29.9.1945, “On Voter Lists.” In: *Gazeta Zyrtare* no. 54, October 1, 1945.

³² AQSH, F. 14/AP strukturë, V. 1945, D. 147, fl. 11.

³³ AQSH, F. 14/AP strukturë, V. 1945, D. 147, fl. 34.



E. Hoxha and K. Xoxe addressing to the Albanian people during the election campaign, Tirane, November 1945.

Photo: ATSH, Politika 1945.

will not allow any opposition groups.³⁴ For CPA leaders, the Democratic Front was the people's political organization—only a fascist or pro-fascist would be against joining it. It is sure that this conception of individuals outside the Front, at a time when the whole world was organizing campaigns to punish war criminals, would have held back the opposition. Individuals in opposition almost never stood for election as independent candidates. Furthermore, it was hard to obtain the legally-required 20 signatures required for independent candidates, because even the people signing would be labeled as reactionary and their signatures thus ignored.

But even under the oppressive conditions orchestrated by the Communist leaders, the anti-communist opposition attempted to take action. In the opposition's campaign slogans, it requested that CPA candidates appear on a separate list.³⁵ Their purpose here was to differentiate the Front's Communist candidates from those who were merely pro-Communist. This would have made it easier to discover the Communists' true support among the people. On the other hand, had the CPA emerged as a separate party within the Front, it would have been more likely to include noncommunist candidates in the national (proportional) list. Consequently, this demand was definitely unacceptable for the CPA.

By the end of November 1945, a part of the anticommunist opposition had presented a petition to the British military mission and the American civil mission. It demanded: a postponement

of the election; a guarantee for the protection of each candidate's life, honor, and liberty; a free press with equal promotion for all candidates; and observation of the elections by committees from the Western Allies³⁶. The British Foreign Office expressed skepticism towards the group that filed the petition. None of the petitioners were considered influential people by the British mission; at most, some of them had held minor positions in the past. The most prominent members of the Albanian opposition were missing among them—and especially Gjergj Kokoshi. Brigadier Hodgson, head of the British military mission, had expressed the opinion that “although the country has a significant opposition to the current regime [the provisional government—S.B.], it is quite unable to organize an effective political force and it is not capable to replace the current government with an adequate administration.”³⁷

On November 28, 1945 (Albania's Independence Day), an opposition group issued a call to the Albanian people on behalf of the Democratic Union. In this declaration, the opposition tried to show the Albanian people that the Democratic Front was actually the Communist Party. It explicitly claimed that the type of regime that the DF wanted to install in Albania would not be democratic at all. It drew attention to the fact that the Democratic Front's governance so far had cost the Albanian people “the mysterious disappearance of thousands of innocent people, horrible prisons and inhuman tortures, which occurred throughout the country by means of the ‘People's Courts.’ CPA

³⁴ AQSH, F. 14/AP org. udh., V. 1945, D. 1, fl. 12.

³⁵ AQSH, F. 14/AP strukturë, V. 1945, D. 147, fl. 22.

³⁶ TNA, FO 371/48085/63888/ R 19859/46/90.

³⁷ TNA, FO 371/48085/63888/ R 19859/46/90.

► Women gain the right to vote for the first time in Albanian history, Tirane, December 2, 1945. Photo: ATSH, Politika 1945.

►► Citizens of Tirana casting their votes in the electoral center where Enver Hoxha was a DF's candidate, Tirane, December 2, 1945. Photo: ATSH, Politika 1945.

forces the people's Government not to allow our people to express and defend their opinion freely.³⁸ For this reason, the Democratic Union urged the Albanian people "to oppose the elections by abstaining, and if abstention was not possible, no vote should be cast for [the] Front's candidates."³⁹

Left without legal recognition or any means of self-promotion, and under strict observation by the secret police, the opposition found it impossible to gain the room to organize themselves during the election campaign. Thus no opposition group was able to present alternative candidates. However, two independent candidates were included on the lists of candidates running for election.

On November 27, 1945, in conflict with the Election Law,⁴⁰ the members of the group "Bashkimi Shqiptar i Shkodrës" (Albanian Union of Shkodër) were arrested. There could have been several reasons why they were arrested a week before the elections. One was to prevent the anticommunist demonstration that—according to a communication for the Ministry of Defense from the director of the Department of People's Defense, Spiro Pano—was about to be organized by the abovementioned group. The petition sent to the foreign missions in Albania was another strong reason for this group's arrest. Furthermore, the group included many Catholic clergymen who had openly stated that they did not support the provisional government. With this arrest, the Communist leaders sought to intimidate the entire opposition, to prevent support for the idea of abstaining.

The CPA's situation was totally different from that of the anticommunist opposition. Camouflaged within the Democratic Front, it controlled everything related to the elections and the election campaign. Its highest leaders perceived the

³⁸ NARA, Record of the US Department of State, relating to the internal affair of Albania 1945–1949, roll 1, Department of State Decimal file 875.00/12-1245.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Paragraph 5 of article 4 of the Election Law clearly stipulates that "within ten days before the elections and five days after the elections, no governmental institution can summon any voters for any reason."



elections to the Constituent Assembly as the mere granting of a concession.⁴¹ According to the Communists, the people had already decided on the regime for Albania—and that was a "people's regime." This means that the Communists considered the elections a formality that existed to ensure them legitimacy in the international arena. The CPA was quite aware that its government's position in the international arena was still unsure.

On October 22nd of 1945, the CPA's Central Committee held the proceedings for its Fourth Plenum. The election campaign, including preparations for the elections, was an important topic of discussion there. In a report, Enver Hoxha, as the CPA's General Secretary, analyzed the overall national situation. He wrote that the CPA had taken control of the internal situation, but had not made any progress in the international arena. "The elections—he said—would be a measure to influence the allies."⁴² To achieve this, Hoxha ordered that there be no violence during the election campaign.⁴³ Looking at the police measures at that time, even Koci Xoxe ordered that "with the enactment [announcement—S.B.] of the law, our organs of power maintain a fair attitude, with no police action."⁴⁴ The CPA's leaders instructed

⁴¹ AQSH, F. 14/AP org. udh., V. 1945, D. 1, fl. 11.

⁴² AQSH, F. 14/AP org. udh., V. 1945, D. 1, fl. 9.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.



that the Front achieve not just an ordinary victory, but a convincing one. “It is not about winning—E. Hoxha said—but about winning “schia-ciante-ly [getting a landslide victory—S.B.]”⁴⁵

Sejfulla Malëshova⁴⁶—a Politburo member and Minister of Propaganda—did not share Hoxha’s confidence on the degree of internal success. He stated that the people were showing dissatisfaction with the country’s condition. According to him, this dissatisfaction was caused by “what we promised during the War and what we are giving; i.e. measures that claimed more than they can actually achieve.”⁴⁷

On November 7th, 1945, the candidate lists were declared. The Front’s list consisted of 108 candidates for 82 seats. The other 26 candidates were part of the candidate lists separated within the Front, but they were mainly procommunists. Thus, Front’s candidates Miha Lako and Pandi Kristo were standing for Korça region. Lefter

Konomi and Spiro Xhai, both members of Greek minority were Front’s nominees for the Dropulli region. All of them were communists and had been decided as winners in advance. The list of candidates running for the Assembly contained for the first time three women: Ollga Plumbi, the candidate for Tirana; Liri Gega, the Vlorë candidate, and Naxhije Dume, the Korça candidate. Two noncommunist independent candidates also filed for candidacy, in Korça and Vlorë. The Korça candidate withdrew his candidacy the day before Election Day.

On November 14th, the Democratic Front’s program was published in the Front-published newspaper “Bashkimi.” This was more proof that the CPA was insecure about popular support for the regime it was proposing. This program’s principles were ambiguous. The Front, it said, would work to install a “democratic people’s regime,” but there was no mention of a “dictatorship of the proletariat” as a constituent part of the regime. The program also stipulated that the Front recognized and accepted the fundamental human and political rights: freedom of speech, organization, press, and confession—but that these freedoms were, however, “for the broad masses of working people.”⁴⁸ Regarding the economic part of the program, it was obvious that the Front would apply a Soviet-style

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Sejfulla Malëshova was a member of the Politburo of the CPA’s Central Committee and was the Minister of Press, Propaganda, and Popular Culture. He was one of the few CPA members who had lived and studied in BRSS. S. Malëshova was known as moderate communist. For that reason, in February 1946 he was expelled from membership in CPA and from all his duties. He was banished from Tirana and forced to live the rest of his life in Fieri, a small town in Western Albania, where he died in 1971.

⁴⁷ AQSH, F. 14/AP org. udh., V. 1945, D. 1, fl. 11.

⁴⁸ *Bashkimi*, November 14, 1945.



Enver Hoxha, Omer Nishani and Myslim Peza heading to the first meeting of Constituent Assembly, Tirana, January 10, 1946.

Photo: ATSH, Poltika 1946.

economic program, but freedom of property was recognized.⁴⁹

As expected, the election campaign was entirely dominated by the CPA, which used all available propaganda tools. Teams comprising communists, representatives of women's organizations, youth, etc. were sent out into all districts to run the pro-Front campaign. The CPA was never mentioned, and even its highest leaders did not campaign outside their electoral district. The campaign was claimed to be for the Democratic Front and the provisional government. In the CPA-organized celebrations for the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution's success in Russia on November 6th, propagators were instructed not to talk to the people about the Bolshevik revolution, but instead celebrate this day as an important holiday for the USSR as one of Albania's wartime allies.

Election Day and its results

After all the legal tricks, propaganda, and state violence, on December 2nd, 1945, the elections to the Constituent Assembly were held. Election Day was reported as mainly calm, with no serious problems. On the basis of an order issued by the Central Committee on November 30th, 1945, there was a lively, festive atmosphere at each polling station, with singing and dancing. This was arranged in order to convince foreign journalists

and photographers of the people's enthusiasm for the elections, with the intent of making the Front's victory seem more convincing. The district committees had drawn people into the squares near the polling stations, creating the enthusiasm that the CPA's leaders expected. However it should be noted that in some provinces, the enthusiasm needed no imposition: in certain, mainly southern regions, people seduced by propaganda had come to celebrate what they thought of as their government.

As expected, the voting process ended with a victory for the Democratic Front. Their sensational victory was announced the following day. According to preliminary data, 89.8% of the voters registered in the voter lists participated, and 93.5% of them voted for the Front.⁵⁰ The voter turnout in the largest cities was lower than the national average. Thus, 87.1% of the voters participated in the Tirana election zone whose candidate was Enver Hoxha, while in another, whose candidate was Ollga Plumbi, the turnout was a mere 83.1%.⁵¹ The voter turnout in the district of Vlorë was 78.6% or less. It was even lower in the areas traditionally supporting the Legality movement, such as Krujë, Fushë-Krujë, Mat, etc., and the number of people in those areas who voted against the Front was above the national average⁵². In the Shkodër

⁴⁹ *Bashkimi*, November 14, 1945.

⁵⁰ *Bashkimi*, December 3, 1945.

⁵¹ AQSH, F. 14/AP strukturë, V. 1945, D. 58, fl. 6.

⁵² AQSH, F. 14/AP strukturë, V. 1945, D. 58, fl. 76.

district, abstentions reached 23% to 28% of registered voters. This percentage was especially high in the town of Shkodër, and in certain provinces, such as Dukagjin, Malësi e Madhe (Bajzë, Hot, Kastrat); Mirditë (Orosh, Fan etc.), Lezhë (Breg i Matës, Zadrimë), and Pukë (Iballë)⁵³.

Communist leaders considered the voting process free and democratic. But also: it was considered acceptable by Albania's British and American missions. The British Military Mission Report announces that its representatives had been able to observe polling stations in Shkodër, Krujë, Lezhë, Milot, Mamurras, Durrës, Kavaja, Lushnjë, Berat, Fier and, Vlorë. They had come to the conclusion that: "despite any pressure that could have been exerted before, on election day there was no apparent intimidation."⁵⁴ The same conclusion was reported by Jacobs, as leader of the American civil mission⁵⁵.

It may seem that the Communists' leaders accomplished their goal: to show foreign missions that they had the support of a large part of the population. However, the ballot-casting process actually had a number of deficiencies and shortcomings. First, there were cases of manipulation. Kavaja and Durres, according to a report from Adil Carçani, saw the hiding of the balls for the "no-candidate" box.⁵⁶ Similarly, in the district of Peshkopi, in the village Lojmë të Lumës, 53 balls were removed from the no-candidate box and dropped into the Front's box.⁵⁷

There were also cases where the secret-ballot principle was violated. All the reports sent to the CPA's Central Committee after the voting process highlighted the fact that individuals who voted against the Front were not able to do so secretly. The methods that officials used for identifying them are still unclear. However, we can see their basic outline via one account from Berat, in which "a comrade had removed the fabric of the secret box in order to hear the votes."⁵⁸ This may have served as a means to intimidate opponents by forcing them not to throw the ball into the no-candidate box.

There were also flagrant cases where people were forced to vote for Democratic Front candidates.

⁵³ AQSH, F. 14/AP strukturë, V. 1945, D. 58, fl. 123–129.

⁵⁴ NARA, Record of the US Department of State, relating to the internal Affairs of Albania 1945–1949, Department of State Decimal file 875.00/12-1245.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ AQSH, F. 14/AP strukturë, V. 1945, D. 58, fl. 36.

⁵⁷ AQSH, F. 14/AP strukturë, V. 1945, D. 58, fl. 36

⁵⁸ AQSH, F. 14/AP strukturë, V. 1945, D. 58, fl. 99.

The report of the Vice Superintendent of the Second Division, Myzafer Trebeshina, says that in Shkodër, "on December 2nd, early in the morning, the army had gone to the polls," forcing an increase in the people's shows of enthusiasm. Another account that comes from Petrela states that the supervisory board (committee), noticing that balls had been thrown into the no-candidate box, suspended the voting process and walked out to persuade people to vote for the Democratic Front candidates⁵⁹.

Most reports do not provide exact figures on the effect that these irregularities had on the results of the elections. Considering Albania's overall postwar situation, the Front's favorable position as the leader of the Albanian resistance, and the policies followed by the leaders of the provisional government—propaganda, violence, exclusion from the electoral rolls, etc.—the Front's electoral victory on December 2nd was to be expected. But of course without the irregularities, the Democratic Front would have had to declare a less sensational victory.

After this victory, the Constituent Assembly met on January 10th, 1945—and a few days later declared Albania a People's Republic.

Concluding remarks

By analyzing the political situation in 1945, the legislative package for the elections, and the elections' development, we can draw some conclusions regarding our main point of discussion: legitimacy. With the elections on December 2nd, 1945, the CPA was seeking to legitimize the power it already exercised through the Democratic Front. In reality, the people voted for the candidates of the Democratic Front, not for the CPA. The Front, not the CPA, was the political force that had won the war; its program also recognized fundamental civil and political rights, and this was attractive for citizens. This is the reason why most people voted for the Front. Very few of them understood that a vote for the Front was actually a vote for the dictatorial regime that CPA planned to install. It was the Front which received the right to represent the people, and not the CPA.

Although the Front won a victory, as was predicted and could be expected, it was still less spectacular than expected. Only 80% of the northern Albanians voted for the Front. Even the voter turnout in the largest cities was approximately 80%—lower than the national average. The same result

⁵⁹ Ibid.

was achieved in the prefectures of Durrës, Tirana, Shkodër, and Peshkopi. There were no opposition candidates, but votes against the Front were clearly intended “for the opposition.” They amounted to 36,758 votes, or 6.76% of voters nationwide. And in the major cities such as Tirana and Durrës, they amounted to a full 12–13% of the votes.

Abstention was another way of expressing opposition toward the representatives of the Democratic Front. And if we were to count as “anti-Front” the votes of those who could not vote because they had been arbitrarily deprived of this right and the votes of those who abstained to show opposition to the Front, then the Front’s victory would be narrower.

The mandate for the “people’s power” could also be considered controversial for yet another reason. In 1946–1948, 20 deputies out of 82 could not finish their mandate. Fourteen assembly members were stripped of their mandates, imprisoned, and sentenced in 1946–1947 as enemies of the “people’s power.” Two assembly members who were Bektashi leaders also died under suspicious circumstances. Others were eliminated as a result of the struggles within the CPA.

In conclusion we can state that the December 2, 1945 elections marked a crucial moment in the CPA’s takeover. Out of 82 Assembly members elected, 55 were members of the Anti-Fascist National Liberation Council, and 27 were new

members of the Democratic Front. No independent or opposition deputies were elected. After the elections, the CPA resorted to all means needed to preserve this monopoly. ■

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SUMMARY & KEYWORDS

The December 2nd, 1945 Albanian Elections: Legitimization, or Mere Formalization for Communist Power?

The article aims to give an historical survey over the seizing the political power by the communists in Albania in 1945. The discussion is focused mainly on the question whether the communist government enjoyed the support of the overwhelming part of the population, i.e. was a legitimate government, or they forced the Albanian population into accepting them. The Albanian communists were able to seize the power before the foreign armies left the country. However they lacked the international recognition of their government. The Yalta Conference conditioned the recognition of the new provisory governmental authorities in the liberated counties with the conduct of free and democratic elections. Relying to the Yalta agreement, the western Allies, USA and UK conditioned their recognition for the provisional government with holding of the free elections. The article deals widely with the Albanian communist leaders’ efforts to ensure the victory during the elections of 2 December 1945. They used the propaganda to motivate their supporters and the terror to get rid to their political adversaries, hindering them to organize; they promulgated a legal framework that prohibited the opposition to participate in the election. Albanian Democratic Front ensured the victory in the elections of 2 December 1945, which in the final analyze was not as spectacular as they were propagandized.

► legitimize, election, Albanian communists, opposition, Albanian Democratic Front, people’s power