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Albanian politics: The ‘prehistory’ of a coming political clash

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The fierce rivalry between the two largest Albanian parties has marred the country’s image and has slowed down Albania’s EU accession process. As the European Union continues to monitor the Democrats’ and the Socialists’ efforts to hammer out a deal to improve Albania’s electoral system, another political confrontation seems to be developing. The simmering new conflict was triggered by the two most influential and popular centre-right politicians in the country: the Prime Minister, Sali Berisha, and the President, Bamir Topi. The Berisha - Topi political tension is escalating, and one can safely bet that their relationship will constitute a new front of political conflict in the near future. As his mandate draws to a close, the ruling Democratic Party has intensified its attacks on President Topi, and the President himself, who has remained quiet for some time, is increasingly shaping his independent political identity and has begun responding to the barrage of attacks and accusations. Interestingly, until only a couple of years ago Bamir Topi was one of Prime Minister Berisha’s favourite politicians. Why this change of moods? What are the roots of the clash between these two powerful political figures?

A Democratic Party story

The story may have its roots at the turbulent Albanian elections of the spring of 1996, which were won by Sali Berisha and the Democratic Party. Bamir Topi was appointed Minister of agriculture, but more importantly the Vice-President and effectively the number two in the Democratic Party. Sali Berisha’s government was forced to step down in 1997 under the pressure of civil unrest and popular protests following the collapse of the ‘Pyramid schemes’. Topi remained the Vice-President of the party for several years until he was elected President of Albania. Whilst he was the second most important person in the party, he remained for years in the shadow of Sali Berisha.

In July 2005, after 8 years in opposition, the Democratic Party returned to the government. Bamir Topi ventured to become Minister of Internal Affairs, a desire that was not realized. He had to wait for another two years to be rewarded for his loyalty to the Democratic Party. In July 2007, with the help of Sali Berisha and especially Jozefina Topalli, the Parliament’s Speaker, Topi was elected President in the fourth ballot. It was a tumultuous election as political bickering among the parties in the 140-seat legislature resulted in three failed attempts to elect a new president. In the end, Topi gained 85 votes—marginally above the 84 needed to be elected—thanks to several opposition Socialist Party MPs who disregarded their party’s call to boycott the vote.

Many feared that with the election of Topi, the Democratic Party would establish a strong hold and control over the state Presidency, but instead, Topi executed his duties with fairness towards all parties. Topi’s relations with his mentor Sali Berisha soured when—after the 2009 elections—political bickering in the country and the conflict with the Socialists escalated. The President’s equidistance was interpreted by Democratic Party officials as siding with the Socialists. After the January 2011 anti-government protests, the Prime Minister’s and his close associates’ standard attacks against the Prosecutor General’s office and judges spread to include the President as well. President Topi was accused of being part of an attempted coup d’état orchestrated by the Prosecutor General and the head of the secret service.

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A dispute of heirs

Sali Berisha was joined by the Parliamentary Speaker, Jozefina Topalli, in attacking the President. Both Bamir Topi and Jozefina Topalli have been for years politically nurtured in the Democratic Party and can be considered as political 'offsprings' of Prime Minister Berisha. Both started their political careers after the collapse of the communist regime and matured politically during the sensitive 1990s. After Bamir Topi became president, the initial feelings of respect and mutual support between him and Topalli were gradually replaced by a frozen mood and later by mutual loathing. The frequent exchange of insults, verbal attacks and polemic rhetoric has made the political atmosphere of Albania suffocating.

The first rift in the Topi - Topalli relationship sprung in 2008 with the initiative of the Democrats and the Socialists to amend the constitution without taking into account the opinion of the President. In the proposed changes of the constitution the President's powers were to be curtailed in favor of the Prime Minister. Topi's initial reaction was immediate but measured. Another dispute emerged over judicial appointments. In June 2008 the President came under fire from Topalli and Berisha, who refused to vote on a series of appointments to the Albanian Supreme Court. Topalli argued that the President ought to have consulted with the government before submitting the nominees for parliamentary approval.

In recent months, the relations between Topi and Topalli have deteriorated further to the extent that the former encountered an 'unfriendly' atmosphere when visiting the northern city of Shkoder, Topalli's stronghold and place of origin, in October 2011. With Topi effectively out of the Democratic Party, Topalli, an 'iron lady' of Albanian politics, is increasingly seen as the emerging leader in the party—the politician who will likely succeed Sali Berisha.

President Topi going independent

Whilst Topi has not publicly spoken to that effect, it is by now widely assumed that he will form his own centre-right party once his mandate expires. Such a move will likely influence the party landscape significantly and may be seen as a threat to the Democratic Party's power base. As a result, attacks on Topi and subsequent responses have multiplied. The March 2012 commemoration of the Lezhe Covenant gave the two sides the opportunity to exchange even more accusations. The Presidency charged the Prime Minister with changing the ceremony's protocol and denying the President the opportunity to speak at the event; the Prime Minister rejected the accusations.

Moreover, Topi has repeatedly come under fire for not signing a Democratic Party-promoted Lustration Law, which was deemed unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in February 2010. In a recent commemorative ceremony in honor of the victims of communists, the Prime Minister criticized the President for not signing the Lustration Law that would make revelations of communist crimes possible. Topi reacted by declaring that in the last twenty-two years Berisha has been promising compensation to the politically prosecuted people during the communist era to no avail. Additionally, he called on the Prime Minister to offer an explanation for his membership in the Communist Party between 1986 and the end of the former regime.

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Party system fluidity

Topi's soon-to-be-formed centre-right party will add to the growing fluidity of the Albanian party system. Most of the new dynamism emerges at the right of the spectrum, a fact that increases the headaches of the Democratic Party. Topi's political alternative will likely weaken the Democrats electorally. It will also become the haven for disenchanted officials of the Democratic Party, such as the former parliamentarians Besnik Mustafaj and Gazmend Oketa, who are expected to be among the first to join the new formation.

Furthermore, the Democrats may lose out on nationalists. The Red and Black Alliance (RBA) of Kreshnik Spahiu, which began as a movement by espousing the unification of all Albanians in a single state, gradually demonstrated more political ambition and registered as a political party. It is expected to have a noteworthy showing in the forthcoming parliamentary elections in 2013. The recent discharge of Kreshnik Spahiu from the High Judicial Council has reinforced the hostility between him and Sali Berisha. The Red and Black Alliance's main goal is to sap strength from the Democratic Party. The main difference between Topi and Spahiu is that Topi's expected new party will in all likelihood aim to primarily weaken the Democrats, while Spahiu targets the ruling Democratic Party and the opposition Socialist Party equally; the Red and Black Alliance criticizes both as corrupt and insufficiently patriotic parties.

With already two new right-wing forces on the rise, eagerly waiting to gain from the Democrats' electoral base, the foundations of the Democratic Party have begun to tremble. What frightens Berisha most is the fact that he may lose some of the most popular members of his party and, of course, the next elections. In a tactical move in response to these threats, Sali Berisha upgraded his party's cooperation with his second most important ally, the Party for Justice and Integration (PDIU) representing the Cham community, by giving them two ministerial posts. It remains to be seen whether the Democrats, as in the past, will prove resilient in the face of new challengers. One thing is for sure, the Albanian political system frequently generates new political confrontations which raise political tensions and make the reaching of political consensus more complicated. There is a high probability that Albania's new political clash will reflect the elite tensions between Berisha's Democrats and Topi's new party.



Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha as denying President Bamir Topi the opportunity to speak at Lezhe Covenant, by saying him “you will not talk”.

[Cartoon by Bujar Kapexhiu, Gazeta Mapo, <http://www.mapo.al> (4 March 2012)].

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