

Power Grab in Albania



By David L. Phillips

Anti-government protesters in Albania portray recent events as “Tunisia-style” people power. In reality, the orchestrated street riots were a naked grab for power. The Obama administration must not be snookered into supporting a coup d’état masquerading as a pro-democracy movement. It should use America’s considerable influence in Albania to calm tensions and make sure the perpetrators of violence are held accountable.

Tirana Mayor Edy Rama, who heads the opposition Socialist Party, is the chief culprit. Rama has been trying to create a crisis since he was defeated in Albania’s June 2009 elections. Socialist Party election observers did not object when the ballot boxes were sealed. Albania’s Constitutional Court affirmed the election’s legality. The U.S. State Department maintained that election was Albania’s best since the overthrow of Communist rule 20 years ago. When the results came in, Rama alleged electoral fraud. International observers repudiated Rama’s allegations.

The Socialists were beaten fair and square. However, they refused to be seated in the parliament. Ever since, they have tried to obstruct the government of Prime Minister Sali Berisha at every turn. For Rama, politics is more about personal power and enrichment than public service.

Last week’s violent street protests were a desperate bid to salvage the Socialist Party from decline. The Socialists were expecting a thrashing in municipal

elections scheduled for May 8. Looking for a game-changer, Rama incited violence to create a crisis as pretext for demanding early national elections.

There are reasons why support for the Socialists is slipping. Berisha’s Democratic Party can point to real achievements since it came to power in 2007.

Albania was asked to become a member of NATO in April 2008. The European Union finalized its Visa Liberalization Dialogue enabling visa-free travel for Albanian passport holders to Europe in November 2010. And the EU recently provided a roadmap for Albania to become a candidate for membership.

Despite the global economic crisis, Albania has seen steady economic growth. It has realized macroeconomic stability, mild inflation, relative currency stability, and banking credit expansion. The government is committed to privatization and market economic reforms. Poverty rates have plummeted. Albania’s 10% personal corporate flat tax has spurred Foreign Direct Investment.

The Government has strengthened the rule of law via legislation promoting an independent judiciary. It has adopted measures enhancing checks and balances among the branches of government. To mitigate corruption, the Public Administration Service was downsized.

Tax and customs collection were made more efficient. Procurements are published and more transparent. Steps have been taken to curtail the informal economic sector and take on organized crime. Albania was once a haven for human trafficking. Today it is a model for cracking down on trafficking and assisting victims.

For sure, corruption is still a problem that will take decades to

eradicate. Albania shares the same problems as other post-Communist and post-conflict countries in Southeastern Europe.

On January 14, Albania’s deputy prime minister and economy minister were taped discussing a kickback. The Deputy Prime Minister immediately resigned; action by the prosecutor is pending. To address the swirl of speculation, the Albanian Attorney General has sought for assistance from the U.S. Government to verify the tape’s authenticity.

Rama presented the resulting street protest as a spontaneous expression of popular frustration. In fact, Rama and his opportunistic Socialists purportedly based in thousands of paid protesters and plotted a violent overthrow of the government. Protesters acted aggressively hurling stones and charging police. It is deeply regrettable that three protesters were killed when they tried to storm the prime minister’s office.

Albania’s politicians should take a step back from the brink and moderate their overheated rhetoric. An inquiry would be in order. Perpetrators of violence — be they plotters, protesters or police — should be prosecuted.

America’s involvement requires moral clarity. Albania is one of the few countries where the United States is beloved. To use its influence, the Obama administration should dispatch a senior envoy to encourage dialogue and calm tensions.

Recent violence is a challenge not only to peace and progress in Albania. It is also a challenge to America’s standing in a region that was the focus of U.S. foreign policy in the 1990s.

(Mr. Phillips is Director of the Program on Peacebuilding and Rights at Columbia University.)

Tension builds beneath calm after violence in Albania

By Matthew Brunwasser

TIRANA — On Monday afternoon, piles of fresh flowers and red-and-black Albanian flags lay in puddles on a soggy Tirana street where three anti-government protesters were killed last Friday.

The events of last week were the most violent protests the country has seen since opposition supporters stormed the prime minister’s office in 1998, but the streets remained quiet Monday, as the country’s president, Bamir Topi, and American and European Union ambassadors called for calm.

Still, the capital remained traumatized by the bloodshed and building political conflict.

“It’s like living in a war zone,” said Fatos Lubonja, an intellectual who spent 13 years in a hard-labor camp during the Stalinist rule of Enver Hoxha.

He said the conflict was seen by the public as representing the battle between two large groups of political and economic interests that has little to do with the public interest.

“Even though you are not fighting in the war, every day you have to live with the consequences,” he said in an interview Monday in the Hotel Tirana, the country’s fanciest hotel during the Communist era.

In a special session of Parliament on Sunday night, deputies voted for an inquiry into the causes of the violence following a protest by some

20,000 supporters of the opposition Socialist Party, led by Tirana’s mayor, Edi Rama.

The Socialists have refused to recognize the results of the 2009 parliamentary elections, which gave Prime Minister Sali Berisha a second four-year term. Protests have been continuing off and on over the past several years. Last week’s was the first to become violent.

Albania remains one of Europe’s poorest and most unstable states. Although it joined NATO in 2009, and last month its citizens were granted passport-free travel through Europe’s Schengen zone, the European Union has delayed membership talks out of concern for Albania’s weaknesses with the rule of law and failure to combat organized crime and corruption.

On Monday, Mr. Berisha postponed his pro-government “rally against violence,” originally planned for Wednesday, until Saturday.

The Socialists have planned a rally for Friday in the same location as last week’s protest, in which crowds threw sticks and stones at Mr. Berisha’s office building and police responded with tear gas, stun grenades, water cannon and firearms.

“This polarization has created two alternatives: Either we will have one dictator or a civil war,” Mr. Lubonja said. “Both options are unacceptable to most people.”

(The New York Times)

Rep. Engel condemns Violence in Albania and appeals for calm

Washington, DC—Rep. Eliot L. Engel, Chair of the Albanian Issues Caucus, today condemned recent political violence in Albania and urged all parties to work out their differences peacefully.

Rep. Engel said, “I condemn the violence in Albania earlier today and urge all parties to resolve their differences peacefully and through dialogue. I am profoundly saddened by the loss of life and express my

most sincere condolences to the families of the victims.

All people of Albania have the right to demonstrate peacefully and speak their minds. However, violence to promote one political cause or another is deeply regrettable. I urge all Albanians to immediately take a step back from these most unfortunate tensions and to work out their differences peacefully and without resort to bloodshed.

NAAC Strongly Denounces the Violent Demonstrations in Albania

The National Albanian American Council (NAAC) strongly denounces the violence that occurred during today’s demonstrations in Albania. We offer our deepest condolences to the families of the victims who tragically lost their lives, and we pray for the safety and well being of the injured. As citizens of a democratic country, the people of Albania have a right to demonstrate, however any use of violence is unacceptable and

cannot be justified in any manner. We call upon the Albanian legal institutions to launch an immediate investigation into the incident and apply the laws to their fullest extent.

We implore the people of Albania to remain calm and avoid any further violence or provocation. Further, we call upon the Albanian government institutions to provide the leadership and protection of its citizens during this crisis.



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