

Electoral Processes and Democratic Consolidation in Albania

Albana MISJA

JUDGE AT THE FIRST INSTANCE COURT
OF GENERAL JURISDICTION IN BERAT

Abstract

Electoral processes represent a central mechanism through which societies legitimize political authority and sustain democratic development. In Albania, electoral practices have historically mirrored broader political transformations, from pre-independence representation in the Ottoman parliament to symbolic elections under authoritarian regimes, and more recently to pluralist democratic contests since 1991. This paper examines the historical evolution of electoral processes in Albania, analyzing their role in shaping institutional legitimacy and their contribution to democratic consolidation. Special attention is given to the parliamentary elections of May 11, 2025, which occurred in a shifting geopolitical landscape and amid significant internal institutional reforms. By exploring historical trajectories, legal frameworks, and international monitoring practices, the study assesses whether Albania's electoral processes have progressively advanced democratic standards over three decades of political pluralism and whether the most recent elections represent a meaningful step toward democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Albania, democracy, elections, political legitimacy, democratic consolidation

Introduction

Background

Elections constitute a fundamental component of democratic governance, serving as the principal mechanism through which political legitimacy is derived (Arendt, 2002). They not only allocate power but also symbolize a society's commitment to democratic norms. In the Albanian context, electoral processes have historically wavered between democratic and authoritarian practices, reflecting the broader political and ideological trajectories of the state. Since the fall of communism in the early 1990s, elections have been central to Albania's democratic transition and its pursuit of Euro-Atlantic integration.

This paper addresses the following research questions:

1. How can the historical relationship of electoral processes be interpreted in relation to the evolution of the Albanian state?
2. Have successive electoral processes in Albania shown progressive improvement since 1991?
3. Why do contemporary geopolitical developments lend particular importance to the May 11, 2025 elections?
4. Do the 2025 elections represent a meaningful step toward Albania's democratic consolidation?

Literature Review

Theoretical perspectives on electoral processes emphasize their dual role: as procedures for legitimizing power and as mechanisms for ensuring democratic accountability. Max Weber's (2005) concept of legitimacy highlights the importance of procedural regularity in securing authority, while Hannah Arendt (2002) underscores the risk of electoral manipulation in totalitarian contexts. Comparative studies on European elections reveal that even within democracies, procedures have evolved from rudimentary and exclusionary practices to more inclusive systems.¹

In Albania, scholarship has noted the complexities of democratic transition, where international actors such as NATO, the European Union, and the OSCE have significantly shaped electoral reforms.² Yet, persistent challenges such as

¹ Le Digol, C., Hollard, V., Valliot, C., & Barat, R. (Eds.). (2018). *Histoire d'élections*. Paris: CNRS Éditions.

² Hasa, G., & Gjatolli, E. (2025, May 16). Edi Rama tightens grip on Albania. *Osservatorio Balcanico*. Cusaco: Transeuropa.

misuse of public resources, clientelism, and weak political will remain central obstacles to democratic consolidation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design, combined with a hermeneutic interpretive approach, to explore the role of electoral processes in Albania's democratic trajectory. The qualitative method allows for selective analysis of historical and contemporary electoral developments, while the hermeneutic approach enables interpretive examination of legal frameworks, institutional practices, and political discourses.³

The research draws upon primary documents, including Albania's electoral codes, OSCE/ODIHR observation reports, and Central Election Commission publications. Secondary sources include academic literature on electoral history, democratic theory, and Albanian politics.⁴

Comparative insights from European electoral histories provide contextual grounding. Data analysis proceeds through historical-institutional interpretation, assessing how electoral processes have legitimized varying regime types across Albania's modern history. Special emphasis is placed on the May 11, 2025 elections, examined through reports, turnout data, and institutional evaluations, to determine whether they constitute meaningful progress toward democratic consolidation.

Historical Overview of Electoral Processes in Albania

An electoral process in our time sounds like a common practice, consubstantial with democracy and politics. The ballot, the ballot box, or the voting booth have become the usual companions of the voter, to the point that it is hard to imagine an election without them. Yet, from Roman Antiquity to the French monarchy, from 18th-century Venice⁵ to the American democratic Republic, one uncovers the long but complex history of electoral processes.

The technical procedures of elections themselves, spread out in space and time — such as auricular voting whispered into a secretary's ear, voting by approval or rejection ball, by show of hands, by roll call, by correspondence, by proxy, or more recently by electronic means — in no way constitute the substantive importance of an electoral process⁶.

³ Weber, M. (2005). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. Taylor & Francis e-Library.

⁴ (Arendt, 2002; Le Digol et al., 2018)

⁵ *Look at : Historie d'élections, sous la direction de Christophe Le Digol, Virginie Hollard, Christophe Valliot, Raphael Barat, CNRS-Edition, Paris 2018*

⁶ *Ibid.*

Electoral processes are standard procedures that legitimize the form of a political system or regime. However, the attribute 'free and democratic,' when it comes to an electoral process, also constitutes the major difference between characterizing an electoral process as democratic or non-democratic. Albania has experienced both forms of an electoral process — democratic and non-democratic — which have served precisely to legitimize systemic forms in specific historical contexts. Paradoxically, Albania underwent its first experiences with parliamentary elections even before the emergence of the Albanian state (1912). This occurred during the imperial period of Albania's history.

The first experience in the Albanian space, administratively represented by four vilayets, took place during the Ottoman Empire, precisely when the Young Turks took power in Istanbul. Although it was a multiethnic imperial Ottoman parliament, the elections were not direct but based on representation, starting from the year 1906. Albanians ran as candidates in various political groupings. Well-known historical figures such as Ismail Qemal Vlora, Hasan Prishtina, and Esad Pasha Toptani were elected as deputies to this parliament⁷.

The first parliamentary elections for the selection of Albanian national institutions were held between 1921 and 1923. The process, for its time, can be considered democratic, though it also reflected certain socially emancipatory limitations, similar to those present in various other European countries.

There existed an unsophisticated electoral code, Article 6 of which provided for the exclusion of women from the right to vote, while Article 25 excluded the armed forces, including commanders, officers, and soldiers, from voting. Meanwhile, Articles 1 and 8 deprived of the right to vote all men convicted of disfigurement, prisoners, and the mentally impaired⁸.

The autocratic nature of Ahmet Zogu's power—as President from 1925 to 1928, and even more so as King from 1928 to 1939—reduced the electoral process to a merely symbolic procedure. During the period of the communist dictatorship, elections became a forced political exercise that served to grant absolute legitimacy to the communist regime, contributing to the formation of that phenomenon which the prominent philosopher Hannah Arendt described as the "atomization of societies in totalitarian systems"⁹.

The only novelty that this process contained was the right to vote for women, who were now considered equal subjects before the Law or social ethics according to the version of communist regimes. This right was institutionalized in Albania

⁷ Analiza me titull : Historia e zgjedhjeve nga forma me e hershme e demokracise te zgjedhjeve te 25 prillit 2021 in <https://a2news.com/historia-e-zgjedhjeve-nga-forma-me-e-hershme-e-demokracise-te-25-prilli> -23 prill 2021.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Arendt, Hannah: Les regimes totalitaires, Les origines du totalitarisme Edition du Seuil and Gallimard, Paris 2002 p 170-171

in 1945, or 17 years later (1928) from the moment when all women over the age of 21 were granted the right to vote, as an almost universally recognized legal norm¹⁰.

In a political context such as that of dictatorial Albania, where the violation of fundamental human rights became commonplace, the initial stages of free elections at the onset of the democratic transition in 1991 acted as the primary catalyst in the development of a democratic framework in Albania. The new global conditions brought about by the ideological disintegration of the previous communist regimes in Europe did not support a scenario of fraudulent elections in our nation. Consequently, the 1992 elections, which validated the so-called epochal shift from a totalitarian regime to democracy, were conducted in a technically sound manner. Since that year, Albania has adopted various electoral systems, including majoritarian, proportional, and a hybrid of both.

Contemporary Electoral Developments

The Current Electoral System

The current electoral system, which has been legally in force since 2008, is a regional proportional system based on multi-member electoral districts¹¹. The Albanian Parliament consists of 140 deputies for a four-year term. The candidates are elected from 12 electoral districts that correspond to the administrative counties. The Central Election Commission (CEC) redistributed the number of mandates for each district, starting with 3 in Kukës and 37 in the capital of Tirana where the majority of the population is situated¹².

Meanwhile, according to the changes in the Electoral Code in July 2024, the electoral procedure in Albania consists of two forms that regulate the structure of the ballot paper: - the multi-member list with a fixed order of candidates, as well as - the list of candidates who are subject to preferential voting¹³.

Competing political forces are financed by the Albanian state budget through a special fund, which is distributed in the form of public financial assistance in accordance with the provisions of Article 19 of the Political Parties Law¹⁴.

¹⁰ Fuqizimi i rolit të grave në procesin e vendimmarrjes! Kjo broshurë është pregatitur në kuadër të projektit “Fuqizimi i rolit të grave në procesin e vendimmarrjes”, zbatuar nga Fondacioni Qendra Europiane dhe mbështetur nga Fondacioni Konrad Adenauer, zyra për Shqipërinë. Fq. 5.

¹¹ Komisioni Qendror i zgjedhjeve ne Tirane/United Nation (Women): Informacion praktik mbi Proçeset zgjedhore ne Shqiperi, f 2-4, Tirane 2025.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid, faqe 3

¹⁴ Ibid, faqe 8-9.

The legal framework regulating electoral processes during the period of Albania's democratic transition did not constitute a problem in itself. It was the political will that began to compromise the regularity of electoral processes in Albania by promoting what is known in political science as the notion of contesting political legitimacy.

The 1996 elections were marked by state-sponsored violence aimed at controlling the progression and outcome of the electoral process, whereas the socio-political unrest of 1997 moved in the opposite direction. It challenged the legitimacy of the central authority, stemming from various geographically dispersed localities in the southern part of the country.

Lacking a long-standing tradition and, as a result, the consolidation that comes with regularly held democratic elections—a political phenomenon that turns the rules of democratic power into a kind of automatism—the forms of democratic consolidation in Albania over the past three decades have left much to be desired.

Whereas Albania's accession to NATO—the largest military alliance in human history—and the official opening of negotiations for the 29 accession chapters with the European Union, helped to avoid the precedent of extreme politically motivated violence that had characterized the country during the 1990s.

In the document dated April 9, 2024, titled *The New Regulation on the Transparency and Targeting of Political Adversity*, the importance of reinforcing democracy and safeguarding the integrity of elections was emphasized. This important document originates from a package of measures adopted by the European Commission on 25 November 2021, aimed at strengthening democracy and safeguarding the integrity of elections¹⁵.

Case Study: The May 11, 2025 Parliamentary Elections

The parliamentary elections held on May 11, 2025, took place in a transformed political and social landscape in Albania. Despite a low turnout in this electoral process (approximately 45%), the Socialist Party secured over 52% of the vote—more than four percentage points higher than in 2021—resulting in 83 seats in the 140-member Assembly, nine more than it currently holds. The Alliance for Greater Albania, led by the Democratic Party (DP) secured only 30% of the vote, resulting in 50 parliamentary seats—nine fewer than in the previous legislature.

The significance of international institutions in today's context offers oversight mechanisms for electoral processes globally. This is especially crucial in nations such as Albania, which are still regarded as developing democracies. The core message of the report from the joint observation mission conducted by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) alongside the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) is encapsulated in the

¹⁵ Ibid.

following assertion: “Elections for Albania’s parliament were competitive and managed with professionalism. The authorities effectively addressed the challenge of facilitating out-of-country voting for the first time, and candidates generally enjoyed the freedom to campaign”. The continuous conduct of legally regular and ethically proper elections constitutes the primary driver of a country’s democratic stability, serving as a permanent phenomenon in the process of democratic consolidation.

Justice Reform and the Establishment of SPAK

Within the political and institutional equation of our country, specialized institutions have been established as part of the new Justice structure. Albania’s Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK)—which encompasses the Special Prosecution Office, the National Bureau of Investigation, and the special anti-corruption/organized crime courts—has become a central institutional actor in the country’s democratic trajectory. By design, SPAK targets high-level corruption and organized crime, a mandate repeatedly highlighted in EU monitoring documents as part of the rule-of-law “fundamentals” that shape Albania’s EU path (European Commission, 2024).

These institutions have contributed to the formation of a new regulatory framework aimed at addressing the previously existing lack of institutional balance in Albania. The Special Structure against Organized Crime (SPAK) has now emerged as a fundamental institution, currently undertaking investigations into high-ranking politicians from across the political spectrum. Due to its handling of high-profile cases, SPAK is now the most trusted institution of a majority support of the Albanians and its continued operation as an independent body, free from political interference¹⁶.

Albania’s justice reform, initiated in 2016 as part of its broader democratic consolidation agenda, represents one of the most comprehensive institutional transformations in its post-communist history. Central to this reform was the establishment of the Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK) and the creation of special corruption and organized crime courts. These institutions were designed to address entrenched problems of political interference, systemic corruption, and lack of judicial independence that had long undermined public trust in governance.

SPAK was given a broad mandate to investigate and prosecute high-ranking officials, including members of parliament, ministers, and judges suspected of corruption or organized crime. Complementing this structure, the special corruption courts provide a specialized legal forum to adjudicate cases brought

¹⁶ Ibid.

forward by SPAK. Together, these institutions aim to ensure impartiality, accelerate case resolution, and strengthen accountability in Albania's democratic institutions.

In countries with a long-standing history of democratic practices, the political occurrence of developing a cohesive institutional-democratic structure has been firmly established. As a result, any possible challenge to the integrity of an electoral process is managed and settled through the legal frameworks present in the existing system. The recent electoral process was additionally overseen by the Special Anti-Corruption Structure (SPAK). This represents a significant advancement in the institutional framework and electoral procedures, thereby offering a more robust assurance for their effective operation.

At this particular historical moment, Albania is experiencing a progressive enhancement of democratic standards within its electoral processes, which plays a crucial role in the democratic consolidation of the nation's institutional framework; nevertheless, this alone does not serve as a definitive assurance of ongoing democratic stability. This principle is relevant not only within the Albanian context but also extends to nations with more established and advanced democratic legacies.

The Relevance of SPAK To Albania's 2025 Parliamentary Elections

SPAK's significance in the 2025 elections arises from two interrelated factors. Firstly, its increasing casework has placed corruption at the center of pre-election discussions. Prominent investigations and prosecutions—targeting former high-ranking officials and party leaders—have ensured that issues of graft and misuse of power remain central to campaign narratives and media attention (Associated Press, 2025; Reuters, 2025). SPAK's initiatives have influenced public perceptions of integrity in governance.

Secondly, SPAK directly impacted the integrity of the 2025 contest by fulfilling its role in the investigation of electoral offenses. International observers assessed the elections as competitive and conducted in a professional manner. Importantly, the observation mission acknowledged SPAK's "positive role" in probing electoral corruption and enhancing collaboration with the Central Election Commission (CEC) and the General Prosecutor's Office—an institutional connection that is significant for both deterrence and accountability following the elections (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025).

The 2025 report from the European Parliament highlights the significant role of SPAK and the associated implications: it "emphasizes the essential efforts" of SPAK in establishing a history of investigations, prosecutions, and convictions related to high-level corruption cases, while also urging all stakeholders to avoid actions that could weaken independent institutions and to enhance operational capabilities (European Parliament, 2025). This dual message—acknowledgment

paired with appeals to protect independence—illustrates the importance of SPAK's credibility in the context of democratic consolidation and in preserving public confidence in electoral results.

More broadly, EU assessments in 2025 continue to frame Albania's progress through the lens of justice reform and the rule of law. Commission materials emphasize SPAK's consolidated results and the need for sustained independence and resources, linking these to accession conditionality and public confidence (European Commission, 2025). In effect, the political and reputational costs of interfering with SPAK are higher in an election year precisely because of EU scrutiny and the salience of corruption in voter heuristics.

In sum, SPAK's relevance to the 2025 elections is twofold: as a *symbolic* arbiter of Albania's break with impunity and as a *procedural* actor in electoral-crime enforcement. Its investigations shaped campaign discourse and party competition, while its coordination with electoral authorities offered a pathway to deter vote-buying and misuse of state resources. The institution's continued independence—and the political system's ability to accept its outcomes without instrumentalization—remain essential both for post-election legitimacy and for Albania's EU trajectory (European Parliament, 2025; OSCE/ODIHR, 2025).

Conclusions

Electoral processes constitute the cornerstone of the democratic exercise of power. This corresponds, to some extent, with the traditional definition of democracy, which held that legitimacy of power was derived from a free popular will, embodied in an electoral process. However, electoral processes do not constitute the foundation upon which the perpetuation of a democratic state of affairs in a country is built. The interplay between internal socio-political circumstances and external factors—this time of an ideological and geopolitical nature—proved to be influential in this regard. If we refer to the historical background of electoral processes in Albania, they predate the emergence of authoritarian forms of power, yet they have been unable to prevent such political phenomena. Ahmet Zogu's authoritarianism was primarily the result of the imposition of personal ambitions upon a society lacking a genuine democratic tradition, at a time when radical nationalist ideologies were ascending to power across Europe. While Enver Hoxha's dictatorship was forged as the national implementation of a new social order inspired by an ideology with universal aspirations—namely, Marxism. Both variants of authoritarianism or dictatorship effectively terminated democratic electoral processes.

Electoral processes in Albania over the past 34 years have unfolded almost in parallel with the country's progressive institutional integration into the broader democratic space of the Euro-Atlantic community. NATO membership, along

with the path toward full integration into the European Union, constitutes two powerful institutional drivers that serve as guarantees of the country's democratic development. The challenges encountered in the electoral processes of the past three decades are largely attributable to the unwillingness of certain high-ranking political figures to ensure transparency and fairness in the mechanisms through which political power is acquired in Albania. At this current historical juncture in which Albania finds itself, the integrity of electoral processes not only contributes to the consolidation of democratic norms regarding the transfer and exercise of power, but also serves as a guarantee that Albanians themselves can offer to the broader international democratic community—one they aspire to fully join—demonstrating both their genuine commitment to democracy and the values it embodies.

Implications

The 2025 parliamentary elections in Albania illustrate both the persistence of democratic practices and the enduring structural challenges facing the country's political system. On the one hand, international observers assessed the electoral process as competitive and efficiently managed, demonstrating progress in institutional capacity (OSCE/ODIHR, 2025). On the other hand, systemic issues such as unequal access to resources, allegations of corruption, and political polarization undermined the overall fairness of the contest (Reuters, 2025; Associated Press, 2025).

Civil society actors, particularly women's organizations, also highlighted the importance of inclusive participation and decision-making as essential to strengthening democratic legitimacy (Fondacioni Qendra Europiane & Fondacioni Konrad Adenauer, 2023).

The elections consequently illustrate Albania's intricate path: a country decisively aligned with the European Union yet still contending with the enduring impacts of fragile institutions and deep-rooted patronage systems. Ongoing involvement from international allies, along with internal reforms aimed at improving transparency and accountability, will be essential for guaranteeing that Albania's democratic progress transcends mere procedural competitiveness and advances toward genuine equality and the rule of law (European Commission, 2024, 2025).

Simultaneously, the elections of 2025 underscore numerous pathways for future inquiry. Researchers ought to investigate the enduring impacts of clientelism, corruption, and media bias on the legitimacy of elections (OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2025). Comparative analyses between Albania and other nations in the Western Balkans could elucidate the effects of European Union conditionality on the process of democratic

consolidation (European Commission, 2024; European Parliament, 2025). Additional exploration into the contributions of civil society, especially regarding the promotion of gender equality and the political engagement of youth, may yield valuable insights into enhancing democratic inclusivity (Fondacioni Qendra Europiane & Fondacioni Konrad Adenauer, 2023). Lastly, a longitudinal study of voter confidence in institutions would assist in assessing whether Albania's democratic path is progressing towards resilience or is still hindered by ongoing structural weaknesses (Reuters, 2025; Associated Press, 2025).

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