

Who Needs Ideologies in Albanian Politics?

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Abstract

One of the main features that has characterized the Albanian political scene during these three decades of democratization, has been the problematic relationship that political parties have had with political ideologies as a linkage mechanism to mobilize their electorate and secure votes in elections. The relationship of Albanian political parties with certain political ideologies can be described as a strained and problematic. This has happened because such ideologies have either remained too “tight” to the suit of action or policies that our parties undertook when they were in power, or because political ideologies have not served these parties as an effective instrument, or as a linkage mechanism, to attract votes from the Albanian electorate. In this sense, this paper argues that Albanian political parties have increasingly relied on non-ideological instruments and strategies to guarantee what is the main goal of political parties in every country: securing votes in elections. The aim of this paper is to address the causes of the problem of de-ideologization of Albanian political parties, seeing this as a problem that relates and reflects the social structure of Albanian society during the period of its democratization after the ‘90s.

Key Words: *Political Parties, Political Ideologies, Linkage Strategies, De-ideologization, Social Structure.*

Introduction

For a long time, not to assert since the beginning of political pluralism and party competition in Albania in the early 1990s, the relationship of Albanian political parties with certain political ideologies can be considered as a strained one. This has happened because such ideologies have either remained too “tight” to the suit of action or policies that Albanian political parties have undertaken when they were in power or because political ideologies have not served these parties so much at all. Notwithstanding some ideological blandishments and appeals in the campaign rhetoric such as having as reference certain ideological positions left or right, political parties in Albania rarely issue detailed and coherent programmatic platforms that rely on certain political ideologies to mobilize their electorate and to secure votes in elections. Various authors (Kajsiu 2010; 2016; Ilirjani, 2005; Jano, 2008) agree that political ideologies have not served at all as a basis for building political programs and for the articulation of promises by Albanian political parties in front of their electorate. Thus, “political parties, in spite of being part of the right or left spectrum, cannot be easily distinguished from one another based on their stance on essential topics as EU integration, free market and privatization, public services, education and health, agriculture and tourism. This has led to what Blendi Kajsiu refers as “*democracy where political pluralism has lost its meaning due to ideological monism*” (Cited in Bino, 2017: p. 43-44).

In the same way, Jano described the policy programs of Albanian political parties as irrelevant to serve as a linkage strategy through which parties in Albania gain electoral support. He put it in this way: “The programmes of parties lack clear political positioning on a great number of important issues... It seems that parties’ policies are of secondary importance making Albanian Parties lose their identity on the ideological spectrum. Furthermore, the parties’ programmes are very general and usually include ‘catchy statements’... Such trends make the political differences of the Albanian political parties’ programs become increasingly very much alike each other (Cited in Jano, 2008: p. 5-6).

With positions on policies that become frequently more similar and ideological identities lacking in them, Albanian political parties have increasingly relied on non-ideological instruments and strategies to guarantee what is and is the main goal of political parties in every country: securing votes in elections. This paper aims to address the main causes of the problem of deideologization of Albanian political parties, seeing this as a problem that relates to and reflects the social structure of Albanian society during the period of its democratization after the ‘90s. The following section (II) provides a definition of the concept of political ideology and the features that characterize it, along with an explanation of the

importance of political ideologies as a linkage mechanism/strategy that guarantees accountability and citizen representation in a democracy. Then, in section III of this paper, some of the main causes of the problem of deideologization of parties in Albania during the last two decades are addressed, as well as the alternative linkage strategies that these parties use to secure their electoral support.

Definition and Importance of Political Ideologies for Party Competition and Democratic Accountability

The concept of “political ideology” has been and remains one of the most controversial concepts in the analysis and various studies of political science. Political Ideology constitutes an “essentially contested concept” if we express it with the terminology of Walter Bryce Gallie, as there are different applications and interpretations for the term, with the authors who do not agree on its exact meaning. However, for the purposes of this study, we will rely on a more neutral and contemporary definition of the concept of political ideologies, without entering the various debates or disagreements that the use of this term has aroused in the past. Thus, according to Leon P. Baradat, ideology and its main characteristics is about:

“Ideology is first and foremost a political term, through it can be applied to other contexts. Second, ideology, consists of a view of the present and the vision of the future. The preferred future is presented as a materialistic improvement over the present. This desirable future condition is often attainable, according to the ideology, within a single lifetime. As a result, one of the outstanding features of an ideology is its offer of hope. Third, ideology is action oriented. It not only describes reality and offers a better future, but most important, it gives specific directions about the steps that must be taken to attain this goal. Fourth, ideology is directed toward the masses... [The elites] direct their appeal to the masses. They are interested in mobilizing huge numbers of people... for the same reason ideologies are usually motivational in tone, tending to call on people to make a great effort to attain the ideological goals. This mass appeal in itself implies confidence in people’s ability to improve their lives through positive action” (Baradat, 2000: p. 9).

Thus, ideology consists of a set of political ideas, values, and beliefs coherent among them, that inspire a political action of political parties about what society should be like or for a project for the desired future [...offers a better future, but most important, it gives specific directions about the steps that must be taken to attain this goal] of a certain society. Defined in this way, ideologies are simply an

instrument that certain political parties or groups use to provide the necessary support to accomplish their political project / vision on the desired future of society. As Schwarzmantel defines ideologies in this way: “political ideologies as providing central organizing frameworks for political debate and action, which contains three elements: critique, ideal, agency’ (Schwarzmantel 1998: p. 2). As such, ideologies are central to politics, to the configuration of party positions on issues / policies, and generation of public policies set by political parties.

In the various linkage mechanisms/strategies that parties use with their electorate, various theorists have emphasized the importance of their programmatic or ideological attitudes for political accountability in a democratic system. Theorists of representative democracy have generally concentrated on this form of political accountability, namely the programmatic accountability associated with parties’ commitments and promises to promote and implement particular positions on fairly broad-based issues of public policy (Kitschelt & Kselman, 2010: p. 4). Since the time of Max Weber, the programmatic connection of parties to the electorate has been theorized as an important aspect of political accountability in representative democracies. “Already in Weber, programmaticism emerges as the effort politicians make to attract voters based on commitments to general policies, delivering public goods or large-scale club goods that benefit classes and social strata” (Cited in Kitschelt & Freeze, 2010: p. 6). In the party-electorate linkage strategy based on programmaticism, voters can assess the overall orientation of each party that leads them to the production of certain positions or policies and precisely choose those parties that are closest to their preferences or interests.

In Anthony Downs’s influential theory of democracy, he famously asserts that parties, in turn, choose or produce their political appeals and positions as close as possible to the median voter, so that they can “catch” as much of the electorate as possible to vote for them. Moreover, rational voters who wish to minimize the distance between their personal ideological ideal points and that of the party coming to office insist that parties maintain programmatic commitments intertemporally in responsible ways and act reliably on pre-election commitments, once elected to office (Downs, 1957: p. 105). In this way, by receiving signals and clues on the policy positions that parties generate based on certain ideologies, voters find it easier to assess the credibility, responsibility of political parties in front of the commitments they make to the electorate about the adoption of certain public policies, and thus it is presumed that democratic accountability is realized. Downs means this when he says: “For rational voters to support any party it must show programmatic coherence and —rational immobility‡ (Downs 1957: 110) of ideological position.

However, in the unknown terrain that characterizes a political party over a 4-year period (from one election to another when voters can choose parties or candidates in a democratic system), there can be many elements of uncertainty that may come to the fore and that may not have been initially anticipated. Therefore, the political ideology again serves as an essential element to make predictable the actions / orientations of the parties about certain issues. Since the slate of issues on the political agenda is always somewhat uncertain, and individual parties cannot single-handedly control the national political agenda, legislative or otherwise, voters would like to know not only a party's position on this or that currently pertinent issue, but also on underlying principles and benchmarks parties employ in order to generate partisan positions on newly emerging issues (Cited in Kitschelt & Kselman, 2010: p. 10). In other words, voters take note of and value a party's general ideological orientation that guides the production of issue positions. While new issues may initially be unrelated to existing issue clusters and underlying party principles, with programmatic electorates parties are under pressure to assimilate issue positions and "map" them onto underlying ideological dimensions. Knowing such ideological principles and their implications for issue mapping helps voters reduce uncertainty over a party's future positions on issues that have not yet come up (Kitschelt & Kselman, 2010: p. 10-11). Thus, political ideology serves as a very important instrument for voters in a democratic system, so that they can assess the credibility and responsiveness of the political parties/candidates they vote for; helps to reduce uncertainty about the future positions of these parties, and thus enables democratic accountability. Various authors (Downs, 1957; Brock, 2005; Bobbio, 1996) have argued about the essential role that political ideology plays for democracy, seeing it as vital for generating alternatives (public policies) set by political parties and for the differentiation between them when the voter chooses in the "democratic market".

In political science, there is a well-known classification made by Sigmund Neumann that is used to distinguish parties from each other, that between *integration parties* and *representation parties*. According to Sigmund Neumann, *integration parties* use action strategies in the sense that they want to mobilize, educate and inspire the masses in relation to certain ideological principles. These parties want to transform society in relation to their ideological principles and therefore require conviction and commitment in their (action) mobilization strategies (Cited in Heywood, 2008: p. 272). In contrast, representative parties are those that use the response or reflective strategies of the electorate, with no intention at all to educate or change it in relation to certain ideological principles. Representative parties, according to Neumann, are parties that in their strategies pay more attention to pragmatism and not to the principles (ideological, programmatic), and having

as their primary function the provision of votes in elections (Cited in Heywood, 2008: p. 272), and are willing to do or promise anything that reflects the wishes of the electorate that can provide them with votes.

Regarding this classification into the *integration parties* and *representative parties* that Neumann makes, we need to make a further elaboration to explain what the second (alternative) linkage mechanism / strategy is also, that political parties can use to secure electoral support. Beyond programmatic policy commitments (which rely on certain political ideologies) as a linkage strategy, political parties can also use a clientelistic strategy, which has as its main feature the targeted delivery of benefits to certain individuals or small groups in exchange for votes they can give. Thus, in the clientelistic efforts that parties can undertake,

“rather than providing collective or club goods to large groups, without checks on whether individual members or groups of members did or did not vote for the party allocating goods, politicians offer private, targeted benefits to individual citizens or small groups (families, street neighborhoods) in exchange for citizens’ partisan support (votes, participation in rallies, campaign work, etc.). What is different from programmatic politics is not only the scale of goods delivered (small, targeted), but also the contingency of the exchange. Benefits ideally accrue only to those who stick to the (implicit) contract: targeted benefits, if votes are delivered” (Kitschelt & Freeze, 2010: p. 4).

These targeted, particularistic benefits that political parties can use to secure electoral support can take many forms, including direct or indirect vote-buying from the people, jobs in public administration, legalization of informal/illegal dwellings, preferential access to social programs and various public services, exemptions from fines or taxes, construction permits, procurements contracts for certain firms, etc. The list of these targeted clientelistic rewards that can be given is long and not exhaustive here.

What we need to emphasize after unveiling these two different linkage strategies that political parties can use in front of voters in a given environment, is that the parties make calculations / considerations as to which of the strategies provide them with the most votes. As Kitschelt and Freeze puts it, “linkage or accountability strategies are the efforts politicians undertake to gain the electoral support that awards them survival and advancement in office, individually or collectively as parties... A “linkage” exists, if politicians successfully demonstrate that they act on (are responsive to) the demands of the constituency supporting them in elections” (Kitschelt & Freeze, 2010: p. 3). And in deciding which linkage strategy will provide them with the most electoral support, political parties must also consider the social, economic, and cultural context in which they operate. And

here we come to the explanation of the factors that have led to the deideologization of Albanian political parties and the linkage strategy that they use against the Albanian electorate to secure votes.

De-ideologization of Albanian Political Parties: Alternative Linkage Strategy that Parties Use with Their Electorate

Which of the linkage or accountability strategies do Albanian political parties use the most to secure electoral support from their voters? Or if we used the classification made by Sigmund Neumann to distinguish political parties from each other, in which of these two categories could we classify Albanian political parties: into *integration parties* or *representative parties*?

If we use as a reference the categorization that Neumann makes about how political parties differ from each other, it can be said that such an explanation stands “tight” to the classification of Albanian political parties, in the sense that they are not part of any of them. Albanian political parties (at least, if we refer here to those who have managed to secure a number of seats in Parliament over the last two decades), have never been integration parties and have never pursued mobilization (action) strategies to persuade or inspire the electorate and to transform society in relation to their ideological principles. So, political ideology has not served them at all as an effective instrument/strategy to convince the electorate about building a future/vision of the desired society, and even less to provide electoral support to them to do so. On the contrary, ideological blandishments and appeals have served only as a facade in the political rhetoric of Albanian parties, when in fact at the ideological level, the differences and positions between them differed very little. As Kajsia has argued: “as ideological and policy differences faded away, the two major parties [Democratic Party and Socialist Party] increasingly relied on institutional arrangements, clientelistic networks and polarizing political discourses in order to continue dominating the Albanian political scene” (Kajsia, 2016: p. 290).

In the same way, it can be said that the Albanian political parties are not genuinely representative parties according to the classification of political parties made by Sigmund Neumann, in the sense that they articulate or reflect the demands of a certain social group and strictly defend (represent) their interests (such can be a left-wing party that defends the interests of the poor, the underprivileged, the working class; or a right-wing party that defends the interests of the rich, entrepreneurs, or even the middle class). Even in this “pragmatic” dimension of electoral representation, where parties simply articulate or reflect the interests of certain social groups that they claim to represent, Albanian political parties

have many flaws and have not seen this as an effective linkage strategy that can ensure their vote maximization. Kajsiu has emphasized in this regard that, “the crisis of representation results from the fact that, because of the deideologization and social dislocations of the transition period, neither of the two major parties in Albania articulated and represented a positive identity of their electorate on which to constitute “the people” as a whole... Under these conditions, different social categories such as farmers, workers or businesspeople, rich or poor were increasingly reduced to moments within “the people” as a whole rather than the starting point from which “the people” were constituted. Therefore, the political process became both conflictual and unrepresentative of different social groups” (Kajsiu, 2010: p. 230). Albanian political parties have only weak or instrumentality ties with social groups or interests (different segments) of society, and as such, it cannot be said that they represent these groups/interests in an organized way.

The main argument of this paper is that Albanian political parties can be called representative parties (not according to the definition given by Sigmund Neumann) only in the sense that they reflect the social structure of Albanian society. In sociology, as Rubinstein has noticed, structures are usually conceived as objective features of social organization which exists independently of social actors’ cognitive beliefs and to some extent they shape and determine their consciousness and action (Rubinstein, 1986). With social structure, we refer here to the model of typical relationships that members of a society have towards each other. From a functionalist approach, the social structure represents the patterned and relatively permanent sets of social relationships that are typical among members of society and that can be analyzed/observed even as recurrent social practices.

Here it is argued that the social structure and model of social relations that are embodied in Albanian society are essentially of a clientelistic, corrupted and particularistic type and that are based mainly on materialist (cultural) values (similarly to those described by Inglehart and Welzel (2005) in their famous study on cultural change and democracy). Frequently, and in most cases of public denunciations in the media, is articulated the idea that clientelistic and corrupt relations exist only to people and parties who have power and who have the potential to abuse it. Actually, such a model of clientelist and corrupt relations exists and is widespread in almost the entire social structure of Albanian society: from the most privileged and powerful position to ministers, MPs, judges, prosecutors, directors, employees, and public administration at all levels, to customs officers, police officers, doctors, and nurses, continuing to the guards or even the sanitary staff of public hospitals (as was the infamous case reported a few months ago in one of the investigative media shows for one of the public hospitals where patients with Covid-19 were treated).

In such an environment where the social structure incentives, or at least does not substantially oppose clientelistic, corrupted, and particularistic relations

between its members, Albanian political parties have developed increasingly efficient ways that reflect such particularistic relations and that provide them with votes. As Harry Eckstein (1966) and other culturalist authors have pointed out, the institutions of a country (including political parties as one of the key mechanisms of representative democracy) must be in harmony with the cultural values of the masses to produce a desired outcome or to function properly. The clientelist strategy has served the Albanian political parties as an effective linkage mechanism for the model of social relations typical for the Albanian society, in their struggle to secure votes, at least if we refer here to the last four parliamentary elections (in 2009, 2013, 2017 and those recently held on 25th April 2021). Both parties [Democratic Party and Socialist Party, without excluding other smaller parties] in Albania have constructed extensive clientelistic networks through which they sustained the loyalty of their followers (Kajsiu, 2016: p. 290).

By clientelism we mean here a type or a strategy linkage where the main characteristic is the particular and targeted use of public resources that serves as an instrumental exchange in the electoral arena between political parties and their constituents. This instrumental exchange means securing votes and other forms of political support given in exchange for jobs (typically in the public sector) and other benefits as “preferential access to social programs and services (such as public housing, scholarships, disability benefits, medical treatment), or benefits for businesses (favorable regulatory decisions, procurement contracts, access to foreign currency)” (Kitschelt & Kselman, 2010: p. 5). Building on this Kitschelt’s definition, the main feature (linkage mechanism) of Albanian political parties is the provision of particularistic benefits to their supporters, and in this way, they can be described as “organized clientelistic structures. As an important scholar of the Albanian political scene has noted: Finding a job in the hierarchy of the state administration, state enterprises, hospitals, schools and other public institutions has very much depended on the relations that a specific person has had with the ruling party at the local or national level” (Cited in Kajsiu, 2016: p. 290).

Albanian political parties which have electoral success and proudly declare the increase of their votes from election to election, are the ones that have adapted and respond best to the model of social relations that dominate in Albanian society. Certain ideological principles, be they liberal, conservative, social-democratic, third way, “green” ideology, etc., are not as tempting and motivating for the mobilization of the Albanian electorate (and for securing votes) as they will continue to be the particularistic methods such as jobs in public administration, public tenders, concessions, preferential access to social programs and services, legalization of illegal/informal dwellings and other favoritisms in exchange for securing votes. A good part of the Albanian electorate does not understand, let alone defend, the ideological principles of their parties. In a recent survey conducted by IPSOS on the behavior of Albanian voters for

the parliamentary elections of April 25, 2021, interesting was the question of how well the respondents knew about the political programs of the three major political parties (SP, DP, and SMI). To the question “which of the elements of the SP, DP and SMI program can you remember”, respectively 44% of the electorate did not know/did not remember any element of the Socialist Party program; 48% responded in the same way for the Democratic Party program; and a percentage that went to 61% of the electorate’s ignorance of any SMI programmatic element (Top-Channel, IPSOS Survey, 2021). Moreover, most respondents who answered this question by identifying relevant elements of the programs of these three political parties, in fact, only mentioned general things about the political offer of these parties (e.g., Population Vaccination Program, COVID 19 Pandemic, Post-Earthquake Reconstruction, etc.), which are not related at all to any program that claims to be based on certain ideological principles.

Conclusions

The function of ideological discourse or the mobilization and inspiration of the electorate based on ideological principles by political parties remains still far from the Albanian political scene. With positions on policies that become more similar and the ideological identities lacking in them, Albanian political parties have increasingly relied on non-ideological instruments and strategies to guarantee what is the main goal of political parties in every country: securing votes in elections. The main (alternative) linkage strategy, outlined in this paper, used by Albanian political parties to mobilize their electorate, is the clientelistic strategy, in which parties distribute targeted, particularistic benefits to their supporters in exchange for votes or political support. In this paper, it was argued that the clientelistic strategy has served the Albanian political parties as an effective linkage mechanism for the model of social relations typical for the Albanian society, in their struggle to secure votes. Albanian political parties that have electoral success are those that have adapted and respond best to the model of social relations that dominate Albanian society and which are essentially mostly of a clientelistic, particularistic type and based mainly on materialist values. In 2016, a famous Albanian politician declared in a meeting in front of members of his party that “their party is not a political force fallen from the sky in the Albanian reality. I believe that SMI is a product of this reality”. Thus, to emphasize once again that, if it were not for this model of social relations that are dominant today in Albanian society (expressed by the euphemism “Albanian reality”), their party and the (clientelist) linkage strategy it uses with the electorate would hardly succeed electorally.

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