

Reframing Democracy: Navigating Economic, Social and Media Obstacles in Albania's Post-Communist Era _____

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates the challenges that Albania faces in economic development, social changes, and media transparency in a democratic, post-communist society. The analysis draws on contemporary historical sources, human rights reports, academic studies, news articles, and official governmental and non-governmental publications, correlating these findings with Albania's journey towards democratization.

Findings: The essay identifies the economic repercussions of communist governance, including prevalent unemployment and fragile market structures. It explores the social impact, linking them to issues like suppression, fear, and weakened trust in the contemporary government.

Originality/Value: This article provides an analysis of the challenges in post-communist Albania, focusing on social and economic developments and media coverage. It suggests targeted strategies for the government to strengthen democratic institutions.

Keywords: Albania, democracy, post-communism, development, media, freedom, transparency.

Introduction

Albania, a nation that has navigated various governance paradigms over the centuries, from the principality to the Ottoman occupation, to the kingdom, to communism and now to democracy as a parliamentary republic. After the fall of communism in 1991, Albania experienced very challenging social and economic changes.

“For nearly half a century Albania experienced a brand of communism unknown to the rest of Eastern Europe. A fateful blend of isolationism and dictatorship kept this tiny Balkan country the poorest and most repressive in all of Europe. During his forty-year reign, the Albanian leader Enver Hoxha banned religion, forbade travel, and outlawed private property. Any resistance to his rule was met with severe retribution, including internal exile, long-term imprisonment, and execution. His domination of Albania’s political, economic, and social life was absolute.

Considering this history, Albania has made substantial progress toward respect for civil and political rights in the past five years. Democratic elections in March 1992 swept the communist party from power, installed a new government led by President Sali Berisha of the Democratic Party, and paved the way for a series of liberalizing reforms.” (Human Rights Watch, 1996)

The communist regime of the leader Enver Hoxha for more than 40 years transformed Albania into an isolated, autocratic and controlled state, subjecting the populace to total oppression, where power was monopolized by an elite few people who inherited power, with a part of the people of the working class and the rest of the politically condemned. This created a wild social divide that continues today.

“At the time, Albania still retained close ties to the Soviet Union. However, from the mid-1950s, its international isolation would intensify. The new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin in 1956 and sought to normalize relations with Yugoslavia. It is hard to tell which of the two irritated Enver more. He eventually broke ties with the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies and began closely cooperating with Mao Zedong’s China. By 1972, as China sought closer ties to the United States in order to compete with the USSR, Enver Hoxha also began denouncing the Chinese as “revisionists” of Marxism. By the 1970s, Albania would be in complete international isolation, best epitomized by its infamous bunkers. Built-in anticipation of a foreign invasion, 750,000 of them are scattered all over Albania to this day.” (Guzvica, 2022)

The decline of the regime began ideologically after many events that happened after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and which initially began in neighbouring

countries being democratized. It was inspired by a spirit of freedom, democracy and a bright future with the slogan “Let’s make Albania like all of Europe” initially by the students and intellectuals who initiated the first protests and who were massively followed by the whole people. The main moment of the very dangerous time that resulted in determination and stability where the bust of Enver Hoxha fell, a symbol of the liberation from the communist regime.

After the fall of the regime, the country faced extraordinary challenges on the road to democracy. The country had no institutions that followed democratic ideas, no strong economy and no civil society at all. The people who served in the main institutions were educated with communist ideas and were labelled enemies by a large part of the people who wanted democracy.

The transition required strong democratic reforms, and an uncorrupted democratic system in a state with a polarized population.

In the first years of the transition, the country faced many political and social upheavals. In 1992, the first multi-party democratic parliamentary elections were held, but the consequences created a great political instability between wild competitors among people who wanted to take power which created many problems in the consolidation of democratic political institutions and the construction of a new legal system.

In this essay, economic and social problems also media coverage will be addressed, how they happened and how they can be improved for a more democratic government.

Arguments. Economic consequences

The economic consequences of communism in Albania have had a lasting impact on the country’s transition to democracy. Under the centrally planned economic system of the communist era, Albania experienced limited economic growth and development. The state-controlled economy stifled innovation, hindered entrepreneurship, and discouraged private-sector development (Guzvica, 2022).

Since private companies and enterprises did not exist, during the first years of the transition, the economy was very much based on enterprises that continued to be state-owned, and the challenges of privatizing these enterprises to bring them to the open market were great in its restructuring.

Today, Albania continues to grapple with economic consequences stemming from its communist past. High unemployment rates persist, especially among young people, posing social and economic concerns (Benjamin, 2021). The transition to a market economy necessitated reforms such as privatization, deregulation, and attracting foreign investment. However, these processes have been gradual and

encountered obstacles during the process. The initial privatization efforts faced issues of corruption and uneven distribution of wealth, which hindered equitable economic growth (Benjamin, 2021).

Furthermore, during the transition, market changes required the industry to further develop and modernize to be more competitive and also to improve business conditions.

Proactive Economic Reforms

In Albania, a number of structural changes are implemented to promote equitable growth, improve competitiveness and productivity, generate employment, and improve public service delivery and governance. Accelerating growth requires diversifying exports and markets alongside connecting the region to global markets. Through its economic decisions, Albania demonstrates its determination to overcome its historical economic stagnation and create a vibrant, inclusive economy. World Bank. (n.d.). Albania Overview

The Albanian economy has made great strides in the development and construction of sectors such as agriculture and tourism. However, there is room for improvement in improving the way of working and reducing informality (Benjamin, 2021).

The weak economic development has had strong consequences towards the development of democracy that is still felt today, where the minimum wage is approximately 200 euros. The consequence of this is the small development of innovation in the private sector. Although there have been developments towards a market-based economy, high unemployment mainly among young people and diversification has influenced the consolidation of transparent institutions and governmental responsibility.

The development of an open market requires the strengthening of socio-economic policies of inclusiveness and fair competition, moving away from monopoly. Opening the way for foreign investments that would promote economic growth and offer many new jobs, which necessarily brings the development of knowledge and skills for work, thus developing the economy and even education with innovative study programs that approach open world markets.

By promoting innovation in the field of technology in many sectors, the government and the people will benefit greatly in reducing costs in sectors such as infrastructure, energy and telecommunications, greatly improving the business environment and gradually transforming it into contemporary businesses and economy.

The government in cooperation with foreign organizations and international financial funds can offer small loans that people with small economic opportunities can benefit from. Thus, people will have the opportunity to become self-employed and create jobs for a few other people, gradually reducing unemployment and contributing to the development of the economy and business development in an open competitive market.

Also, the creation of policies for large international companies in the field of technology and finance would benefit the 3 branches, the government, the companies and the people.

Social consequences

The profound societal divide consequences of communism have left a lasting impact today. Decades of isolation and brutal state control limited freedoms and thoughts of creating a civil society were impossible and too dangerous. Authoritarian control curtailed freedom of expression, if you thought differently than what the party ordered, the person and the family risked exile. Gatherings and associations were unimaginable if they were not organized by the state. The result of this was a distrust of each other, fear and lack of social cohesion.

Social and cultural norms were controlled through educational institutions. Thus, the state imposed its ideologies and stopped development and critical thinking. If an intellectual wrote articles that did not conform to the required norms and ideals, if a singer created a song and was not liked by the party, if an academic made a study that did not conform to the policies, and many other cases, people were imprisoned and the family members were exiled.

“The psychological basis of identity politics lies in the feelings of humans that they possess an inner worth or dignity which the society around them is failing to recognize. The underappreciated identity may be unique to an individual, but more often it flows from membership in a group, particularly one that has suffered some form of marginalization or disrespect. Identity is intimately linked to emotions of pride, anger, and resentment based on the kind of recognition that one receives (or does not receive). Although perceived economic injustices may stimulate the demand for recognition, this drive is distinct from the material motives that impel homo economicus, and can often lead to actions that run counter to economic self-interest conventionally understood.” (Fukuyama, 2020)

After the fall of communism, people who served in various government institutions were seen as enemies by the rest of the society, even though altogether they had suffered poverty. Intellectuals were labelled as communists and consequently, they were attacked politically.

Even high-ranking government officials, who were in favour of democracy suffered the criticism; some even went so far as becoming unemployed by taking on menial jobs to make ends meet.

“Of particular concern is the state’s continued interference in the judiciary. Despite many improvements, the court system is still used as an instrument of the state, especially against the political opposition. The leader of the largest opposition party is currently in prison after a trial fraught with due process violations. Since 1992, numerous other critics of the government have been harassed, tried, imprisoned or, in a few cases, physically attacked by unknown assailants usually without any response from the government. Judges who make independent decisions on sensitive cases are sometimes reassigned to lesser posts or fired. More than 400 persons, predominantly selected by the Democratic Party, were appointed as judges and prosecutors throughout the country, upon completion of a special six-month law course, thereby strengthening governmental influence over the judiciary and law enforcement officials.” (Human Rights Watch, 1996)

Very quickly the oppressed classes wanted to take power, but their qualification was lacking, from the educational and intellectual side, thus building a weak system where the consequences are still felt today.

The system created courses of several weeks where oppressed people could qualify. A good example is the six-month law course where people who did not even finish high school with that course became judges and prosecutors, hindering the development of a democratic legal state. Such people continue to hold high government positions today. “Albania’s road to democracy has been long, at times arduous, but always directed toward a system of government that is transparent in its exercise of power and participatory in creating access points for citizens to weigh in on the affairs of state. For a society whose past is marked by a particularly severe form of communist oppression, the drive to build a democratic system based on pluralistic discourse, human rights, and inclusive decision-making is resolute, and something that has inspired NDI in its support of democratic development throughout its 30-year presence in Albania.

The timing of these investments in parliament is propitious. In the past few years, Albania has been wracked by political instability over corruption allegations, feeding public mistrust in governing institutions and the election process. The country has embarked on a long-term process to root out corruption through restructuring the judiciary, strengthening campaign finance and standing up special bodies to fight corruption--complex undertakings that seek to address the public’s abiding concern about corruption, which routinely ranks as a top issue in NDI public opinion research.” (Benjamin, 2021)

Since, after more than 30 years, people from different backgrounds discriminate against each other, the modern democratic state must develop inclusive practices. Encouraging civic engagement through organizational community centres.

Improving social democratic reforms with a focus on inclusiveness with a focus on the individual and human rights, encouraging dialogue for understanding between different parties and promoting awareness. Feeling that everyone's voice is heard can be promoted in a more open society and encouraging education for future generations.

Media coverage and trust

Citizens have now eroded trust in governmental institutions and this can be understood quite well from the number of voters. In the 2021 elections, out of 3.59 million residents, 1.66 million voted. (Erebara, 2021)

Studies on the spread of hate speech and misinformation in 2020 found that, even while the media isn't often the primary source, it can amplify these messages, especially in online comment sections. The persistence of misinformation in Albanian media is linked to several issues, such as weak professionalism and weak regulation. Political personalities frequently use their large media presence and social media platforms to their advantage as the main producers of misleading and controversial news. A significant factor complicating the issue is the lack of effective methods to address and reduce the increasing number of such harmful narratives within the media field. (Londo, 2021)

To rebuild trust in the government, media entities must assume a pivotal role. During the last few years, many commercial media have been built in Albania, whose purpose is advertising, where they are used in prime time with broadcasts and debates that have propaganda purposes. The media can be called linked to political parties, because every studio promotes the great work done by the government, for the media linked to the party in power, and how the government abuses power for the media linked to opposition parties. The main fact is that political advertising during the campaigns is made through the above-mentioned media.

"Freedom of the press is also circumscribed. No legislation exists to allow for the transmission of private television or radio, leaving the state-run programs that favour the government as the sole provider of news for the majority of the population. While there are many private newspapers throughout the country, they are restricted by a repressive press law and obstacles to their distribution. Since 1992, a large number of journalists, including foreign correspondents, have been harassed, arrested or beaten by unknown assailants after writing articles that were critical of the government." (Human Rights Watch, 1996)

To achieve trust, the government must build policies for the protection and freedom of the press so that the media has its own independent power. Guaranteeing journalists' lives and building a safe investigative environment are 2 main steps in building trustworthiness and credibility.

The promotion of media education, through various organizations and institutions, is an important element that helps citizens not to become victims of fake news, disinformation and misinformation.

The media gains strength and credibility through fostering positive relationships with the media, creating forums for open communication and transparency among the populace nationwide, giving voice to the voiceless and advancing inclusive policies that ensure that no one is left behind.

Conclusion

Albania's long journey from communism to democracy is an ongoing formidable challenge. The economic consequences of post-communism are strong, reflecting high levels of unemployment. The social crisis of oppression, fear and lack of trust have left strong wounds in Albanian society for all generations. The low trust and the controlled media mean that the public's perception and trust for an improvement in democratic policies in the government is low.

Bolstering the open market, the construction of inclusive policies with equal opportunities and the promotion of the construction of the media are important factors in the reconstruction of trust, which will therefore bring more awareness and inclusion. If the people will govern and the state will be more transparent.

Through these projects, the Albanian state could move from communist oppression to an open and free, inclusive democratic future for all citizens.

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