

The crisis in the Balkans intensifies

Bloody disturbances in Albania

Justus Leicht

24 September 1998

The crisis in the Balkans region intensified with the eruption of civil-war type disturbances in Albania during the second weekend of September. Supporters of former president Sali Berisha, who was deposed last year, took over the television stations, the radio and parliament in the capital Tirana. These events were the culmination of repeated armed clashes with the state forces since last autumn.

Only after bloody confrontations were the rebels driven back by the police. Their actions were triggered by the murder of Hazdem Hajdari, a parliamentary deputy and prominent founding member of the Democratic Party (DP), formed by Berisha in 1991.

In the absence of the DP deputies, the Albanian parliament has lifted the legal immunity enjoyed by Berisha, who, prior to the disturbances, had repeatedly called for the armed overthrow of the government of Prime Minister Fatos Nano. The Nano government is led by the Socialist Party (SP), formerly the ruling state party which went by the name of the Albanian Party of Labour (APL). The SP regime accused Berisha of attempting a putsch.

The US and the European countries have stood behind the ex-Stalinists and warned Berisha against a violent overthrow of the state. The American government stated it would not tolerate a government which 'has come to power through violent means'. At the same time the Western countries have put pressure on the SP government to refrain from arresting Berisha, in order to avoid further disturbances and create conditions for a dialogue with the DP.

Up until now, however, no such dialogue has taken place and the protests against Nano have continued. The opposition has refused to give up its weapons, and in the same week as its attempted uprising in the capital it stormed a government police station in the north of Albania, where Berisha's influence is greatest.

For its part, the government threatened to disarm the opposition, with violence if necessary. Since the uprising against the DP government last year between half a million and one million Kalashnikov rifles and other weapons have been taken from army supplies and are in circulation.

How did the present situation develop?

Albania was among the countries gripped by the collapse of the Stalinist governments of Eastern Europe in 1990. Student demonstrations took place and, overnight, numerous Stalinists turned into raging anticommunists. Among them was Sali Berisha, formerly the personal physician to Enver Hoxha and APL secretary of the medical faculty in Tirana. From the end of the Second World War until his death in 1985, Hoxha wielded dictatorial power in Albania.

In the elections of March 1991 the APL emerged as the victor, and proceeded to build a coalition with the DP. However, the Democrats refused to recognise the result of the election, as did the International Monetary Fund, which promptly stopped all economic assistance.

New elections in March 1992 brought Berisha to the highest positions of state power. With the consent of the IMF, he presided over economic 'shock therapy', in the usual manner opening up the Albanian economy to foreign capital and establishing Albania as a region for the military manoeuvres of NATO. The country became an operations base for Western intervention in Bosnia. Under pressure from the US, Berisha also withdrew his initial support for the independence of his 'brothers and sisters in Kosovo'.

In the wake of the market 'reforms', while production and real wages fell drastically and unemployment rose, a tiny layer of old bureaucrats, unscrupulous social climbers and hard-bitten criminals were able to enrich themselves under the protecting hand of the DP government. The most important source of new wealth was the theft of state property, so-called 'privatisation', as well as trade in drugs and armaments. Nevertheless, in 1994 Albania was effusively praised by the IMF and declared to be a role model for Eastern Europe as a whole.

That same year Berisha's star began to wane. He suffered a defeat in a referendum on the issue of new powers for the president. This was also the period when the pyramid funds came into being, a scheme promoted by the government. Investment companies offered higher and higher rates of interest in order to attract investors and thereby finance business investments, as well as the DP. In the end, the interest rates were so high, they could only be paid for from the money of more and more investors. In the election year of 1996 the scam was extended even further. A new banking law declared that security deposits were no longer necessary.

Despite everything, in the elections Berisha was forced to resort, as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has conceded, to massive falsification and repression against the opposition. The US and the European Union looked the other way. But in the spring of 1997 the pyramid funds collapsed, a large proportion of the population lost all of their savings and an uprising broke out, concentrated in the south of the country.

At this point the West changed tack: the US urged Berisha--to no avail--to go into exile. The SP was called on to take over in order to bring the rebellion under control. The party obeyed, entered into a government of 'national unity' and declared its opposition to the immediate resignation of the hated president.

The chairman of the SP, Fatos Nano, condemned to 12 years in prison in a show trial in 1993, was released. The former lecturer at the Institute for Ideological Studies, previously run by the widow of Hoxha, supported an Italian-led military intervention aimed at reestablishing 'stability'.

After the Albanian ex-Stalinists and the Italian military had brought the uprising under control, the SP, despite a state of emergency and

other obstacles, was able to carry off an election victory over the discredited DP. The following month Berisha was replaced as president by the SP candidate Mejdani.

As was to be expected, the policies of the SP did not differ from those of its predecessor. Corruption and nepotism flourished at the same time that the country sank further into poverty and was beset by crime. The population was able to retrieve only a small part of its savings deposits. Much of the pyramid money remained lost, despite--or perhaps because of--the 'search' undertaken by the finance ministry.

The West took very little notice of what was going on. Despite everything, the new government obeyed all of its wishes. In December of last year Nano even stated his express wish that Italy once again serve Albania as protector.

The West was unperturbed by the fact that semi-anarchistic conditions dominated in broad parts of Albania, and that the conflict between the ruling SP and the armed groups of the DP resembled more a struggle between rival mafia clans than a political conflict.

But the situation changed in March of this year, as the struggle in neighbouring Kosovo escalated. Forced out of central power and ruling his own fiefdom in the north, Berisha once again discovered his heart for 'the Albanian brothers and sisters' on Serbian territory. He worked closely with the guerilla separatist organisation, the Liberation Army of Kosovo (LAK). They were able to use north Albania as a base for regrouping, education and restocking of supplies. According to reports, the supporters of Berisha, the core of whom comprise members of the former secret service and presidential guard, were supported by the fighters of the LAK.

At this point problems arose for the Western powers, leading to the hectic diplomatic and political activities of the last months. The separatist movements in Kosovo not only call into question the territorial integrity of Serbia, which is based on the suppression of the Kosovo Albanians, but ultimately threaten the unstable political equilibrium in the whole of the Balkans.

Already in a number of other countries nationalism has erupted fiercely. In the elections in Bosnia it appears that the extreme chauvinists were able to win victories in all of the ethnic enclaves. In the western part of Macedonia, which borders Kosovo and where a majority of the population is Albanian, the LAK enjoys considerable sympathy. Those who favour a split and are in contact with Berisha are gaining support in the region.

Further down, the south of Albania borders Greece, where chauvinism is also growing. Greek nationalists claim not only Macedonia as historically part of their own country, they also raise claims to territory in southern Albania. The Orthodox Church has never reconciled itself to the fact that the Greek government officially rescinded such claims in the 1980s. Since the middle of August the new head of the Church has carried out an open campaign for war against Turkey, and has received support from the conservative parliamentary opposition in Greece.

According to a newspaper report, following attacks on customs posts during the recent disturbances in Albania, Greece has undertaken 'extraordinary measures' on its border with the country. For its part, Turkey has frequently expressed sympathy for Albania, with its mainly Moslem population. At the beginning of the 90s it even concluded a military pact with Albania and has been for some time the main rival of Greece in the region. Both countries are members of NATO.

This is the explanation for the hesitation on the part of the Western

countries with respect to the activities of the Serbs in Kosovo. Irrespective of its threats and sabre-rattling, NATO does not welcome a weakening of the Serbian units in the region because this would be automatically advantageous for the LAK. And an intervention by ground troops would in all probability involve NATO in a partisan war which would be difficult to resolve militarily.

On the other hand, the longer the conflict is drawn out, the more national hatred and bitterness grows. That is why NATO is relying on weakening the LAK in order to achieve a cease-fire and draw the organisation into talks on autonomy. If necessary, this aim is to be supported with air strikes by NATO or what the foreign ministers of Italy and Germany describe as a 'police mission'. The tasks of such a mission include the 'integration of the DP into responsibility' and forcing it to end its support for the LAK.

LAK speaker Adem Demaci has not totally rejected talks with Belgrade, but, in opposition to his rival, Ibrahim Rugova, has rejected until now the terms laid down for a discussion. He conceded at the end of August that the LAK was internally split between his and Rugova's supporters.

Under these conditions there appears to be room for negotiations to emerge, based on the shuttle diplomacy of American diplomat Christopher Hill, who has travelled between Belgrade and Pristina. The heart of such a deal is that 'initially' Kosovo's autonomy will be safeguarded for a transition period of between three and five years, with its own education system and, above all, its own police force. What comes after that is unclear.

Such an agreement will resolve nothing. A look at Bosnia is enough to make this clear. A small layer of functionaries and businessmen have enriched themselves while the living conditions and democratic rights of the broad masses have deteriorated. Former armed nationalists have become the policemen for the suppression of their own people. That brings with it the strengthening of the most reactionary forces on both sides with their chauvinist acts of violence and clamour about 'national betrayal'.

Once again, and in the most tragic way, the Balkans has made plain the dead end of nationalism and the intrigues of the Great Powers.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact