

Three killed in protests in Albania

Markus Salzmann
27 January 2011

Over 20,000 people protested January 21 in the Albanian capital Tirana against the right-wing government of Sali Berisha (Democratic Party, PD). Police responded with extreme violence against the demonstrators; three people died and dozens were injured.

Several hundred demonstrators tried to storm the government building. Police used water cannon and tear gas, also firing live ammunition over the heads of the demonstrators.

Cars were set ablaze in front of the so-called “pyramid”, the building adjacent to Berisha’s government office. Three people were consequently shot dead by riot police. Throughout the night, police officers and members of the National Guard roamed the streets of the capital beating up students and oppositionists.

The immediate cause of the protests was a report on the popular TV station *Top Channel*. The film report showed the Deputy Prime Minister and Economy Minister Ilir Meta (PD) in secretly taped talks, openly negotiating the level of bribes to back the construction of a new hydroelectric power station.

Meta has since resigned, after his attempts to explain the tapes as a forgery failed. Meta is a prime example of the corruption in Albania, which is not limited to Berisha’s governing party. Meta had previously been a leading member of the Socialist Party, and was head of government for three years before joining the Democratic Party in 2004, where he hoped to be better placed to advance his career.

Corruption is rife in Albania. It is virtually impossible to receive hospital treatment without paying a bribe, and it is run of the mill at official agencies and authorities. It is most pronounced at the highest political levels in the country. In recent years, many politicians and officials have either been convicted of corruption or charged with it.

The Socialist Party (PS) of Edi Rama and affiliated organizations called for the demonstration last Friday and have sought to place themselves at the head of the protests in order to keep them under control. But their criticisms of

the criminal activities of the government and call to fight against corruption are entirely hypocritical.

For more than twenty years, Albania has been ruled by a small corrupt clique that emerged directly out of the old Stalinist ruling layers, who divvied up the former state property among themselves and have since been engaged in a bitter power struggle. This includes both the Socialist Party, which emerged in 1991 out of the Stalinist state party PAA, and the Democratic Party of Prime Minister Berisha.

Berisha, the former personal physician of Enver Hoxha, who ruled the country as a dictator for 40 years, until his death in 1985, was a PAA senior official. During the student unrest in 1990, which ushered in the collapse of the Stalinist regime, he tried to mollify the insurgents. Like so many other bureaucrats in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, he then switched to become a fiery anti-communist and supporter of the free market economy.

Berisha created the PD in opposition to the Socialist Party, the direct successor to the PAA. Despite their bitter rivalry, there are few differences between the two parties, which have dominated political life in Albania in alliances with several smaller groups. After 1991, both spearheaded political and economic “reforms.”

These measures had disastrous consequences, above all for the 70 percent of the population who lived and worked in the countryside prior to 1991. After the introduction of the free market, agricultural combines were dissolved and large tracts of land privatised. This in turn led to a complete collapse of infrastructure. Some 40 percent of the population remains tied to the land, conducting the most primitive forms of farming, while Albania imports ten times as much food as it exports.

The reforms also led to the closure of many factories. Thousands lost their jobs and many younger workers quit the country to seek work abroad. The high point of the “reforms” came in the mid 1990s when Berisha supported the activities of thoroughly dubious financial operators who set up a criminal “pyramid” investment fund. A large proportion of the population invested in this apparent gold

mine only to find their savings wiped out when the fund was declared worthless at the start of 1997.

There were uprisings and unrest throughout the country as a result, directed against Berisha and his government. Town halls were set on fire, barracks attacked and plundered. In March 1997, Berisha imposed a state of emergency and accepted the resignation of the Meksi government. In the same year, he lost the presidency to the Socialist Party candidate Rexhep Meidani.

Special militias units were mobilised to deal with the disturbances in the south of the country. Fierce clashes also took place in the capital, Tirana, and in Vlora an angry crowd lynched members of the Albanian secret police. At this point the regime obtained assistance from the west. Units of the US, German and Italian armies assisted in the evacuation of western civilians and sided with government forces against the population. The final death toll of the clashes is estimated at 2,000.

Eight years later, Berisha and the PD returned to power. The Socialist Party had been completely discredited, having done everything to meet the requirements of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, privatising the country's few profitable industries, cutting or abolishing social provisions and pushing through a reduction in real wages.

Currently, the Socialist Party is trying to exploit the hatred of the population for the Berisha government. Last year, they boycotted parliamentary work, and several MPs even went on a hunger strike. Only in May 2010 did the Socialist Party decide to end its parliamentary boycott, under pressure from the European Union.

Politically, there are hardly any differences between the two camps, and so it is no surprise that those who are protesting against the government, mainly young people, are also repelled by the Socialist Party. In particular, the political elite has imposed further austerity measures on the population as a result of the global economic crisis.

In recent months, the social situation in Albania has dramatically worsened. At 15 percent, the official unemployment level grossly understates the reality. With an average wage of €180 and prices for many products higher than in the EU, since many daily necessities are imported, most people struggle to make ends meet. The trade deficit is \$3.2 billion, more than a quarter of gross domestic product.

Remittances from Albanians living abroad have also fallen massively. About a third of the working age population have emigrated. The wider economic crisis means many Albanians abroad, as in Greece, have lost

their work and have had to return.

Many Albanians are forced to get by with illegal activities. Estimates put the level of those who earn their livelihood in this way at about 30 percent. The number of emigrants searching for work abroad is constantly rising. Meanwhile, there are so many Albanians working abroad and supporting their families back home that these private financial flows from abroad are higher than the revenues from all Albanian exports.

In contrast to the growing impoverishment of the population, the Berisha government has sought to make the country attractive to foreign investors, which has exclusively benefited a narrow layer at the top of society. The introduction of a 10 percent flat tax puts Albania at the forefront of the competition for tax cuts that attract foreign capital.

Foreign investors can purchase land at the symbolic price of one euro. Contracts for socially essential services like health care, education, water supply and sanitation, waste disposal, infrastructure, energy and resource extraction are sold at bargain basement prices.

Representatives of the European Union and the US government have expressed concern about the protests and called for a return to "political dialogue" and "more respect for state institutions." At a hastily convened press conference on Friday evening, Edi Rama called on the demonstrators to exercise restraint.

But Prime Minister Berisha has continued to stoke the flames. In a public speech, he described the protesters as "criminals and bandits" who wanted to seize power following the "Tunisian model", and announced a clampdown by the security forces.

The entire political establishment, including the PD, the Socialist Party and the European Union is terrified that the protests could spread beyond Albania's borders to its highly politically unstable neighbours in the Balkans.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact