

Political tensions in Albania destabilise the Balkans

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The conflict between government and opposition in Albania, which has been going on for months, has been temporarily resolved with the Socialist (PS) and Democratic (PD) parties agreeing to postpone parliamentary elections scheduled for 18 June and form a joint government.

As the opposition the PD are to receive the office of deputy head of government, as well as four important ministries and the presidency of the state electoral commission.

On May 13, tens of thousands of followers of the PD took to the streets in the capital city, Tirana, to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Edi Rama (PS) and the formation of an all-party government. Lulzim Basha, chairman of the PD, declared that this would be the only way to a “fair and free parliamentary election.” Otherwise the opposition would boycott the elections, he threatened.

Alarmed about recent developments the American deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian affairs, Hoyt Brian Yee, traveled to Albania for all-party talks. He met first with Rama and parliamentary president Ilir Meta of the Socialist Movement for Integration (LIS), which had formed a coalition with the PS. Afterwards he met with Basha.

The European Union also sent emissaries to Tirana. An agreement was reached allegedly based on proposals made by David McAllister, a former conservative (CDU) premier in the state of Lower Saxony and current member of the European Parliament.

The crisis began in February, when the PD called for a boycott of the upcoming election, the resignation of Rama and the formation of a “cabinet of experts” to ensure a regular election. After Rama refused to resign, the party boycotted parliament and did not register for

the election. On April 24, several thousand of its followers blocked numerous motorways.

PD leader Basha has accused the government of being dependent on criminals and drug traffickers, and “turning the entire country into a cannabis plantation.” According to the Austrian *Standard*, many people in parliament, in city halls, and in public institutions, were “formerly inmates in European prisons prosecuted for trafficking in drugs, women, weapons, for prostitution and murders.”

For his part Rama accused the PD of preventing a reform of the judiciary because of their close links to corrupt judges and prosecutors.

Rama had also been subject to heavy criticism from EU representatives because he used the nationalist card and threatened to form a “small union” with Kosovo, in the absence of any perspective of accession to the EU. This was “not his wish, but just a possible alternative if the EU closed its doors”.

The formation of a “Greater Albania” could once again set the entire region ablaze. Serbia, in particular, which has never recognized Kosovo’s independence, is vehemently opposed to any merger with Albania.

There are no fundamental differences between the policies of the PD and the PS. Both parties, which represent a small upper class elite and are up to their necks in corruption, nepotism and openly criminal activities, are widely despised. They are both committed to rapprochement with the EU and business friendly policies.

The PS is largely made up of Stalinists from the former party of Enver Hoxa, while the PD evolved from a right-wing movement that emerged in the early 1990s. Both parties have participated in government. Basha has formerly occupied ministerial posts and was formerly mayor of Tirana. In 2013 the Socialists won

the election and replaced the Democrats.

The result of the rule of both parties is a social catastrophe, as is the case throughout the Balkans.

Following the collapse of the Stalinist bloc in the early 1990s mass emigration took hold. As of 2011 Albania had 2.9 million inhabitants, down from 3.3 million in 1990 and the number of those emigrating remains high. The World Bank ranked Albania at ninth place among countries with the highest emigration rate in relation to the population in 2015—before Barbados and behind Tonga.

The main motivation for the exodus is widespread poverty. Albania is one of the poorest countries in Europe. According to the Finance Ministry, GDP per capita amounted to about 3,400 euros in 2015. The average monthly wage is only 390 euros. The unemployment rate is over 35 percent and is even higher for young people. The majority of Albanians simply could not survive were it not for a flourishing black market economy.

The main concern of the US and the EU is not for the conditions affecting those poor and low-paid workers in the region. Rather, their main concern is growing instability in the Balkans.

Two decades after the US and Europe broke Yugoslavia apart and waged war, nothing has been resolved, the region is once again descending into political crisis and is dominated by nationalist elites. Warnings of the danger of new wars in the Balkans are mounting. Once again the Balkans resembles a social and political powder keg.

The Serbian government has threatened that ethnic Serbs in Kosovo will be defended by military means when necessary. In Macedonia, nationalists stormed the parliament and attacked representatives of the Albanian minority and Bosnia-Herzegovina is more divided than it was at the time of the 1995 Dayton Agreement.



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