

Albanians 'Ditch' Dirty Poll Tactics

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Tirana parties pledge to fight 'clean' electoral campaigns

This month's general election in Albania looks as if it may be the calmest since the collapse of communism a decade ago.

The signs so far bode well. The two main political parties - the ruling ex-communist Socialist Party and the opposition Democratic Party - have toned down their rhetoric and pledged to lead peaceful, cultured campaigns in the run-up to the general election vote on June 24.

Only eight months ago, in local elections, politicians and the media were hurling insults at each other. Now, the party newspapers have ditched hostile headlines and bitter reproaches in favour of reasoned argument.

This is no small achievement for a nation brought to the brink of civil war in 1997. Then, the collapse of fraudulent pyramid savings schemes gobbled up ordinary people's life savings, a calamitous event which quickly led to widespread anarchy.

Elections that year were marred by violent clashes between supporters of the two main political parties, egged on by their respective leaders.

Many opposition supporters were jailed and beaten. Democratic party leader Sali Berisha, condemned by the West for inciting political violence a year before, lost even more credibility and international support.

Political violence was then so endemic that people boarded up businesses and protected their homes in advance of party rallies.

Now, however, Albanian politics, chronically polarised and antagonistic to the point that ruling parties regarded the opposition as 'the enemy', seem to be softening a little.

This time Berisha and Fatos Nano, a former prime minister and chairman of the Socialist Party, have both solemnly promised to run sensible campaigns.

It appears that they have realised that voters want debate rather than dog-fights. Both have agreed to refrain from holding electoral rallies.

Meanwhile, the Democratic Party, the main opposition group in the country, has gathered in allies from other, smaller centre-right parties to create the 'Union for Victory' electoral coalition.

Its aim is to emulate the winning formula across the Adriatic - that of Silvio Berlusconi's 'House of Freedom' coalition which triumphed in the recent Italian general election.

Their opponents, meanwhile, have opted to go it alone. After months of talks with one-time allies, Nano's Socialists have made clear their disillusionment with coalition government.

They claim their allies have been happy to share Socialist successes - enjoying apparently more executive posts than their share of the vote allowed - but have been quick to pass the buck when things go wrong.

Another significant trend this time around is that electoral candidates have felt freer to shrug off old, and maybe uncomfortable, party loyalties and openly swap sides.

More generally, voters' sympathies have markedly changed. Critics of the Socialists no longer hate them as before. While the Democrats, the first real opposition party, are no longer seen as the only hope for a better life.

Tired and disillusioned by the volatility of political life, many Albanians have come to feel that they are represented by neither party. About 40 per cent of the electorate has declined to vote in previous elections.

As the months of inter-party squabbling to make or break coalitions wore on over recent months, it looked as if politicians were again in danger of alienating themselves from their electorate, in particular the younger generation. Anti-communist rhetoric and tub-thumping about corruption and theft has left them cold.

The parties seem to have woken up to the need to canvas votes and attend to the needs of citizens. And not before time. Because unless the politicians can persuade people to trust them, they will vote with their feet - with the steady stream of emigration to the United States and Canada becoming a tide.

In the forthcoming poll, Albanians finally have a chance to vote for a party because they actively support it, rather than because they hate all the other alternatives. Time will tell if politicians can live up to voters' expectations.

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