

## **Berisha Ditches Cooperation Deal**

**Author:** [Edmond Harizaj](#)

End of political compromise agreement may signal return to party feuding.

The leader of the main opposition Democratic Party, Sali Berisha, has turned his back on an EU-enforced cooperation agreement with the ruling Socialists, following defeat in a parliamentary bye-election. As a result, Albanian political life looks set for a return to the bitter feuding that has long blocked its way into Europe.

Berisha accused the government of foul play after his candidate, Fahri Balliu, was defeated by Socialist Valentina Leskaj in the December ballot in the central Elbasan district, an area noted for its strong support for the Democrats.

The opposition chief claims Leskaj was filmed handing out food aid to some 200 families in the district the day before the vote. Berisha said this "gravely damaged" the cooperation agreement as "respect for free and fair voting" had been its main feature.

The Democrats' leader is now consulting other government opponents - including many former party members who left to form centre-right parties - in the hope of shoring up the opposition before local elections in October this year.

Meanwhile, the Socialist prime minister Fatos Nano will be in for a hard time when he meets EU Commissioner Romano Prodi next month, as the agreement with the Democrats was meant to create a strong political consensus for tackling the obstacles to Albania's entry into Europe.

The agreement, details of which were never disclosed, was reached some time last spring after prolonged EU pressure on Albania to clean up its act as a condition for beginning negotiations for entry into a Stabilisation and Association Agreement, SAA.

The Socialists and the Democrats were expected to put aside their differences and work together to reform government institutions, fight corruption and trafficking and guarantee free and fair elections.

So far, apart from some success in limiting the movement of illegal immigrants and drugs across the Adriatic to Italy, the most visible outcome of the deal was the election of a president, Alfred Moisiu, in June 2002.

The two parties backed the same candidate and ended a political logjam in which neither had been able to push through its choice for the presidency.

Other bi-partisan initiatives, such as a parliamentary committee for election reform, appear to have fallen by the wayside, however.

Throughout the compromise period, both Berisha and Nano have shied away from elaborating on the exact nature of their deal. Indeed, many politicians doubt whether an agreement whose specifics were never spelt out could have achieved anything of worth for the country.

Former leader of the Republican Party, Sabri Godo, asked, "If elections were one issue in the compromise, what were the others? They should tell us."

Godo and other analysts suggests that the alleged irregularities in the Elbasan ballot may be no more than a pretext for Berisha turning his back on the crucial accord.

They say the real reason is the need to do something to bolster the Democrats popularity - and win back the centre-right vote - in time for local elections next October.

While it may galvanise the opposition, the dissolution of the agreement risks undermining the credibility of the Socialist government, especially in the eyes of international bodies such as the EU and NATO. When he meets Prodi next month, Nano will not find it easy convincing him he can fight corruption and trafficking without the full support of the opposition.

The Socialists accuse Berisha of covering up his loss in Elbasan by trying to sabotage the accord. "The loss of a parliamentary seat has nothing to do with the joint agreement which has broader purposes, like integration into the EU and the joint fight to strengthen institutions," said Socialist spokesman Bardhyl Agasi.

But Berisha insists that the fault lies with his rivals, who he says have not entered into the spirit of the cooperation deal. As well as blaming them for manipulating the Elbasan ballot, he recently accused Nano of dragging his feet over reforms.

Pjeter Arbnori, a senior Democrat and former parliamentary speaker, believes the Socialists used the appearance of working together with the opposition to buy themselves time. "That agreement will never be applied. Neither election reform nor other reforms will be carried out," he said.

Smaller political parties on both sides have always complained that the terms of the compromise accord were never made clear to them. They have implied that it was not so much a bi-partisan deal as a vague secretive understanding between Berisha and Nano, whose only purpose appeared to be a reshuffling of top state officials.

Edmond Harizaj is an editor with the Albanian newspaper Koha Jone

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