

NEW ROUND OF OLD STYLE ALBANIAN POLITICAL DOGFIGHTING SET TO BREAK OUT

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The hope of the West - that a new generation would bring normality to Albania's political scene - has been dashed. Instead the old grandees are back in charge, but this time the familiar brawling could have regional consequences.

Albania has taken two steps backwards to a time that many of its people had hoped was behind them.

With the reelection of Sali Berisha as Chairman of the Democratic Party (DP) and Fatos Nano as General Secretary of the Socialist Party (SP), Albania has proven again to the world that it has difficulty learning from its past.

Most analysts believed that the events of the last few years had discredited the records of both leaders beyond repair. Berisha had been willing to see the country descend into civil war rather than resign in 1997 after the collapse of the 'pyramid' investment scams; Nano had fled to Macedonia in fear of his life after the DP's failed 'mini-coup' of 1998.

Most expected them to be replaced by two technocratic thirty-somethings in a long awaited shake up of both parties at their respective party congresses this month. They were wrong. Genc Pollo, 35, who tried to take on Berisha, gave up the fight two weeks ago, and current DP Prime Minister Pandeli Majko, 33, was ousted as party leader by Nano in a dramatic all-night party congress session Monday morning.

With the expectation of early elections by March 2000, many now fear the effect Albania's return to dog-and-cat political brawling will have on its struggling economy, and that the disorder will spill over to neighboring Kosovo, where municipal elections are also scheduled for Spring.

Both Nano and Berisha's campaign for their respective party leaderships included a pledge to reform their old parties to western standards. But both resorted to personal attack and innuendo to undermine their younger opponents, calling in friends on the media to push home cheap, unfounded allegations.

To the western eye, these attacks were bad enough; to many Albanians their indirect accusations of treachery and corruption came straight out of the Stalinist textbook on taking and holding power.

Pollo was the first to fall, accused through Berisha-friendly media of being a Greek spy on the day he returned from a landmark trip to the United States in which Washington's hopes for a new dawn in Albanian politics was made clear. He reigned claiming voting irregularities in the party leadership poll. "We chose not to participate in a process, whose final results have been determined," he said at the time.

Majko found himself accused by Nano - who handpicked him as his successor after he was forced to stand down as party leader in January, four months after stepping down as prime minister in the wake of riots that nearly toppled his government - of mismanaging the economy and selling off state enterprises. The riots were triggered by the assassination of a DP founder Azem Hajdari, which Berisha blamed on Nano's supporters. Nano denies involvement.

The result was a vote, not for either respective leaders' personal qualities but rather a vote against their challengers.

Majko said Monday that he would remain in office despite losing the leadership. "I state with conviction and determination that my government will continue until a change is appropriate," he said. Private Koha TV quoted deputy prime minister Ilir Meta as saying the government would not resign, but would "reflect on the result of the vote and make the necessary changes".

Yet the two victorious grandees will find the political scene changed in this tiny nation of 3.2 million. In the past battles were won by deals struck in private meetings in Tirana coffeeshops. Today the Kosovo crisis means that Albanian politics must be fought out on a wider stage.

Both Nano and Berisha need to win the support of the West, in particular Washington, which has made no secret of its wish that both retire from the country's political scene.

At the same time both Nano and Berisha understand that the West's main interest is regional stability. That will mean that both will need to seek effective 'endorsement' from other regional figure.

Both will be vying for support from Arben Xhaferi, leader of the Democratic Party of Albanians (PDSH) in Macedonia. The PDSH was instrumental in keeping Macedonia's ethnic Albanians calm when Macedonian police forcibly stopped Kosovar Albanians from entering the country.

But the key will be Kosovo. Nano will seek to strengthen his ties to Hashim Thaci, prime minister of Kosovo's provisional government. As Prime Minister during 1998, Nano looked the other way as the Kosovo Liberation Army used Albania for training and rearming its ranks.

Berisha, on the other hand, has openly refused to recognize Thaci and continued during and after the war to support Kosovo's covertly elected 'shadow' president Ibrahim Rugova and prime minister Bujar Bukoshi, of the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK).

Since Berisha's fall from power, Rugova has refused to meet with either Nano or other members of the ruling Socialist party, and although Albania came to host 500,000 refugees at the height of the conflict, Rugova has declined to even acknowledge the Socialist led government's efforts to help the displaced.

Unlike Tirana, Pristina has not had the opportunity to hold free and fair elections. For the past ten years the LDK's uncontested election to shadow government in Kosovo had been based on the desire to defy Serb rule rather than the party's economic or political strategy.

Now a host of common factors - not least the shared reality that both need West aid to survive - and the coincidence of elections on both sides of the border has effectively united Kosovo and Albania as a kind of entity for the first time in 80 years.

The voters are aware of this too. The candidates that can convince the electorate that the West, in particular the United States, is on their side, will stand a better chance of victory. Influence over the border in Kosovo will play its own part in winning Washington's support as well as convincing domestic voters that the big guns are on their side.

But exporting the Nano-Berisha political style to Kosovo can only raise the temperature of an already potentially fraught standoff between pro-KLA and LDK forces. Recreating Albanian politics in Kosovo could have deep consequences for stability in the region.

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