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SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT ON THE ALBANIAN ELECTIONS

Albania's May 26 parliamentary elections, which produced a landslide political victory for President Sali Berisha's Democratic Party, have come under fire. Opposition parties, led by the former communists of the Socialist Party, charge that the pro-Western Berisha government rigged the elections. While some international election observers have supported the opposition's charges of systematic voter fraud and intimidation, many of these observers—particularly some of those in the election monitoring delegation of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe-Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (OSCE-ODIHR)—held a pronounced political bias in favor of the Socialists. Other monitors, such as those from the Washington-based International Republican Institute, have concluded that election violations were not widespread. This interpretation seems borne out by the fact that the election results were roughly similar to exit polls conducted by independent pollsters. The U.S. should avoid being stampeded into a rush to judgment against a friendly government based simply on unsubstantiated charges by anti-American Albanian leftists and their supporters in Western Europe.

That Albania's parliamentary elections were a rough and tumble affair is hardly surprising, considering that they were only the third free elections since the fall of the Albanian dictatorship. The elections pitted President Berisha's Democratic Party, which has been the driving force behind Albania's political and economic reforms, against the Socialist Party, the renamed successor to the communist party whose iron rule had lasted from 1944 to 1992. The contest was especially bitter because President Berisha had led the opposition forces that toppled the communists from power, and the Socialists were bent on political vengeance. When it became clear to them on election day that their efforts had fallen short, the Socialists withdrew from the elections in the late afternoon, charging that the elections had been a charade. Ironically, this cynical critique of Albania's nascent democracy was vigorously promoted by some of the same communists who had formed the backbone of the Stalinist regime of Enver Hoxa, who had plunged Albania into brutal repression and isolation.

President Berisha, a physician, is far from a dictator. He is a charismatic conservative leader who courageously spoke out against the communists, decisively defeated them in the 1992 elections, and pushed through a popular reform program that has brought great economic benefits to Europe's poorest country. Berisha's privatization reforms have spawned a flourishing private sector that has spearheaded Albania's economic growth, which has averaged about 10 percent annually in recent years. Given his popularity and the success of his political and economic programs, he had little need to rig the elections. Moreover, he had respected the workings of the democratic process in the past, such as the defeat of his proposal for a new constitution in a 1994 national referendum.

The first round of parliamentary elections on May 26 brought an impressive turnout of 89 percent of the Albanian electorate. Berisha's Democratic Party garnered approximately 68 percent of the vote, compared with 65 percent in the 1992 elections. Because the remaining votes splintered among six opposition parties, the Democratic Party won 95 of the 115 directly elected seats in the 140-seat parliament. The Socialist Party claimed that the election results were the product of systematic ballot box stuffing, electoral fraud, and intimidation, but by pulling out of the election monitoring commission on election day, it made it all but impossible to determine the scale of these alleged voting abuses.

The election monitors of the OSCE-ODIHR, who have been the most inclined to support the opposition's claims of vote fraud, may be the least credible of the more than 100 international observers that monitored the elections. Mark Almond, a member of the British Helsinki Human Rights Group election monitoring team, turned up evidence that one team accredited by the OSCE-ODIHR monitoring mission was compromised by direct cooperation with the Socialists, who he suspects organized angry crowds of demonstrators at polling stations visited by the OSCE-ODIHR group. The team in question comprised nine members of a left-wing Norwegian group, Workers' International Solidarity, which enjoyed close relations with the Socialists and even requested translators and transportation from them. The OSCE-ODIHR mission also accredited other Socialist supporters, including a Dane who had organized tours of Albania for sympathetic foreigners during the communist era and a German, accused of a pro-Socialist bias in the German press, whose briefings of other election monitors were tendentious and highly emotional.

Significantly, several other monitoring groups contradicted the bleak picture of the elections presented by the OSCE-ODIHR group. The British Helsinki Human Rights Group found the elections to be free and fair. Jonathan Sunley, a member of the group who also had witnessed the 1991 Albanian elections, was struck by the vast improvement in political conditions, particularly "the orderliness and apparent impartiality surrounding the conduct of the election." Sunley also noted that "compared with the elections held over the last 12 months in Armenia, Georgia, Belarus, and Russia, all of which were issued a clean bill of health, the infringements and irregularities in Albania were minor." Election observers from the European Democratic Union also found the Albanian elections to be fair.

The International Republican Institute (IRI), which also deployed an election monitoring team, released a report asserting that "IRI observers did find that in most voting centers they visited the voting procedures were orderly, voter identification was being checked and stamped, and voters had the opportunity to cast a secret ballot in a calm atmosphere." However, IRI observers did find some irregularities in a few voting centers, which led it to conclude that the results of certain parliamentary races—but not the elections as a whole—may have been compromised: "While not widespread, observed voting irregularities raise serious questions about the conduct and integrity of a number of Albania's 1996 Parliamentary contests."

IRI commissioned an independent American-Albanian polling firm to conduct a survey of voters on election day that found that 62 percent of voters expressed approval of President Berisha and 71 percent were satisfied with the development of democracy. IRI's exit poll predicted that the Democratic Party would win 56 percent of the vote, the Socialists would win 22 percent, and the remainder would be split among a number of smaller parties. This exit poll, with a margin of error of 3.5 percent, is not out of line with the 68 percent of the votes claimed by the Democratic Party, especially considering that many Socialist voters may have foregone voting after the Socialists decided to boycott the elections late on election day. Clearly, if there was cheating, it did not decisively affect the outcome of the elections.

Nevertheless, the Albanian government has taken steps to remove doubts about the integrity of the elections. In an apparent concession to the opposition, President Berisha has ordered new elections to be held on June 16 in 17 parliamentary constituencies where there had been reports of significant irregularities. Berisha also ordered prosecutors to investigate charges of police brutality at a Socialist demonstration held in Tirana on May 29. Seven police officials subsequently were fired for failing to rein in police at the banned demonstration.

This undoubtedly will not satisfy the Socialists, who seek to enlist foreign support to have the elections annulled, undermine President Berisha, and drive a wedge between Washington and Tirana. The Clinton Administration should not allow itself to be drawn into the Socialists' plans for what amounts to a *coup d'etat* against the pro-Western government. Washington should not be more supportive of the former communists than the Albanian people themselves have been. Seeking to appease the opposition by forcing more concessions from the Berisha government will only play into the hands of the Socialists, further polarize Albania, and jeopardize the long-term stability of a friendly country that has been one of the few beacons of hope in the volatile Balkan region.

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