

**RUSH!**

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## SOCIALISTS HIJACK DEMOCRACY IN ALBANIA

The democratically elected government of Albania's pro-Western President Sali Berisha has fallen victim to a slow-motion coup d'état launched by the Socialist Party, successor to the Communist Party which dominated the mountainous Balkan country from 1944 to 1992. On March 11, President Berisha was forced to appoint Bashkim Fino, an unelected representative of the Socialist Party, as Prime Minister. The appointment was an attempt to contain a mushrooming armed rebellion—encouraged by the Socialists—that has engulfed the southern half of Albania and now has swept up to the capital of Tirana. The Socialists' efforts to undermine President Berisha, who defeated them decisively in the 1992 elections and again in the controversial 1996 elections, threaten to reverse Albania's hard-won democratic and economic reforms. Moreover, their efforts to destabilize Berisha's regime could transform Albania from a reliable Western ally in the volatile Balkans into a long-term source of instability that threatens Albania's neighbors.

Rather than speak out against these dangerous developments, the Clinton Administration has pressured President Berisha relentlessly to make concessions to the Socialists. The Administration has called for a rerun of Albania's May 1996 elections, despite the fact that those elections were freer and fairer than many others that have taken place in post-Communist nations, including Russia's elections last June. This action, in effect, has helped to de-legitimize the Berisha government and to encourage the spread of anarchy in that country of 3.5 million. The Administration now must take steps to limit the damage to Western interests in the Balkans by insisting that the Socialists, who have capitalized on Berisha's problems to return to power, abide by their agreement with Berisha's crumbling government, hold the promised free elections, and restore law and order.

Sadly, even if this is done, there is little hope that Berisha's free-market economic reforms and pro-Western foreign policy will survive intact. The Socialists are sure to expand their strength in parliament—if not win the elections outright—by exploiting the bitterness triggered by Albania's current economic and political crises.

**The unholy alliance: greed and revenge.** The proximate cause for recent widespread disaffection with the Berisha government is its perceived failure to protect Albanians from painful economic losses sustained in the collapse of several fraudulent investment funds that functioned essentially as pyramid schemes. While similar get-rich-quick schemes have plagued every former Communist country, Albania has been particularly vulnerable because it is the poorest and most isolated country in Europe. The president of the Socialist Party, Fatos Nano, predicted to members of the British Helsinki Human Rights Group last summer that pyramid schemes, not elections, would bring down the Berisha government. In classic Leninist fashion, the Socialists worked to turn an economic crisis into a political opportunity by exploiting a festering situation that their economic policies had helped to create.

When the pyramids began to collapse in January, what began as popular agitation for the refund of lost savings turned into political unrest. Berisha's Socialist-dominated opposition has sought to turn that unrest into a movement to overthrow the government. The Socialists have charged that Berisha's government neglected to protect investors from losses and used profits from investment funds to finance its winning election campaign. In fact, however, at least one government official was pilloried by an opposition newspaper when he warned against investing in one scheme with an exorbitant rate of return. Moreover, two of the pyramid schemes that collapsed in the south, which was hardest hit by the scams, were affiliated with opposition parties.

The Socialists were aided by Albania's mafia, which greatly resented the government's efforts to crack down on its lucrative smuggling operations last fall. Significantly, anti-government demonstrations first developed into an armed rebellion in the seaport of Vlore, a staging area for smuggling drugs, illegal immigrants, and cigarettes into Italy 40 miles west across the Adriatic Sea. After the insurgents seized control of Vlore on March 2, they released the inmates of local prisons, who—having nothing to lose and much to gain—promptly joined the rebellion.

The Vlore uprising set the stage for a string of rebel victories in southern Albania, where the Socialists enjoy strong support but support for Berisha, a northerner, is weakest. Although the Socialists deny they control the rebellion, they have encouraged and maintained contact with rebel groups whose political demands closely parallel their own. Rather than call for a cooling-off period and a return to normalcy to help rid the country of thousands of armed thugs who have killed more than 40 people in rebel-held towns so far, the Socialists have used the rebels as a source of leverage against Berisha.

While the U.S. and European countries pressured Berisha to seek a political solution, the rebels continued shooting and advancing on Tirana. Opposition demands have escalated as the rebels grew stronger. Berisha signed an agreement with opposition party leaders on March 6, only to see it annulled by the same leaders hours later. Berisha then agreed to hold early elections by June 1 and appointed Fino, a Socialist former mayor from the south, on March 11 to head a government of national reconciliation. While Berisha has attempted to meet the demands, it is not clear that the Socialists will abide by their promises to hold free elections. A Socialist spokesman has suggested that such elections will be problematic as long as armed rebels promote anarchy. This has fed fears that the Socialists will not risk elections, but will seek instead to consolidate power under an interim government.

**The U.S. position.** The Clinton Administration, which pressured Berisha into entering a coalition government with his longtime enemies, must take strong action to assure that the Socialists abide by their commitment to restore law and order in the rebellious south and comply with its agreement with Berisha. It should press them to disarm their rebel surrogates, block attempts to violently overthrow Berisha, and prevent the establishment of kangaroo courts or show trials to discredit Berisha and his supporters. The Administration also should demand that the Socialists hold free and fair elections safeguarded by international electoral observers.

The U.S., together with its European allies, should condition future Western aid to Albania on the full restoration of a democratic government capable of reining in mafia thugs and building a prosperous market economy. Unfortunately, this task will be extremely difficult now that Berisha's pro-Western reformers have been eclipsed by the former Communists who led Albania into half a century of repression and isolation. The minor flaws in Berisha's allegedly authoritarian regime are likely to pale in comparison to the crimes of Albania's past and future rulers.

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