

Holidays in Albania

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A journey in Albanian South in revolt

Albanian south in rebellion: Kalashnikov/ happy and angry faces/ “bessa” (straight forwardness, keeping one’s word)/ bursts of gunfire / roadblocks/ Mercedes cars/ hashish/ passports/ our money back/ off with Berisha’s head.

Fragments of words, images, sensations from a journey to an inconceivable rebellion, where analysis, assessments, political conclusions crash onto the roadblock of the people’s impetus.

Crossing the border or from the state of “law and order” to Kalashnikov

Kalashnikov: the first thing we see as soon as we step in Albanian ground. It would be the last too, a few days later. By the edge of the plank, which connects the ship that brought us here from Igoumenitsa to the harbour of Saranda, some armed Albanians are just standing and watching. There is no document control. Some wounded people are waiting for their turn to embark with destination Corfu.

The situation in Kakavia, when we return, will be about the same, with ambulances waiting by the Greek guardhouse to take the wounded, most of them shot by mistake. The revolvers of the Albanians who had escorted us (they had left their kalashnikovs in the car) were just a few centimetres and some iron bars away from Sky TV station’s microphones. One step and a passport check between the visible casual possibility of death and the certainty of a life where we may die everyday. Of course there’s no Albanian guardhouse in Kakavia (to be accurate there is one but it’s completely empty), while at the Greek one, Greek nationalist soldiers are so self-confident that they don’t check us when we pass. At a moment when armed Albanians in Saranda have nothing to lose, armed Greeks in Kakavia are quite self-confident. They can’t shoot their officers, whom they hate, but they claim they’re willing to go “in there” and shoot the “peasants”.

“If only they asked who volunteers to go to Albania, they’d see”, says a smiling special unit soldier. A few hours later, another soldier in Igoumenitsa is grumbling because he’s in duty and he can’t go to that bar where Albanian women work. “Have you been sent by a newspaper?” he asks.

“I’m from a newspaper, too. ‘Golden Dawn’ (neonazi paper)”, he adds smiling.

The one and only authority: guns

In the whole southern region of Albania, there is no police, no army, no jails, no courts, not a sign of state or governing authority. The power of weapons is prevailing everywhere. Everyone is armed, driving around in cars with the kalashnikovs at hand, walking in the streets carrying automatic weapons, revolvers, Chinese TT (always at least two of them and ready to use) in their belts or inside their jackets. It’s impossible to estimate the accurate number of these weapons. Some say they are over four million.

What we know for sure is that all police stations, all army storehouses, all factories where weapons were constructed or assembled have been looted (one of these factories, a kalashnikov construction unit in Polytsa, was one of the first). The question that immediately comes to mind,

how people got hold of all these guns, is a bit complicated to answer. It is a fact that there have been no massive attacks or well organised violent acts. A characteristic example of what happened is the case of the police station in Saranda. In the afternoon of May 1, a few people started throwing stones against the police station, inside which there were about one hundred well armed policemen. Their commander repeatedly called the minister, in Tirana, for instructions. The answer was “we’ll let you know”. The instructions never came, so the police force abandoned the station, leaving behind most of their arsenal. The about fifty members of the secret police – SHIK – had left much earlier. About the same thing happened with the navy station in Saranda. The commander called Tirana as soon as he learnt of the attack and was told that “you’ll receive orders”. The orders were never given and as a result almost all the weapons were abandoned and carried to a place in the open, where anyone could go and pick up anything he liked to. A navy map of Albania, labelled “top secret”, was found a few days later by two French reporters who happened to pass by the area. A notebook with records of army equipment circulation, was found torn amidst looted army tracks with flat tires inside a destroyed and looted army camp in Dropolis.

The gun, at least in the south of Albania, dominates everyday life, in fact it IS everyday life. An ordinary person sees, hears, touches, uses a gun – i.e. it occupies one’s senses – as often as the cigarette would in another society. It is the centre of life; it’s an amusing toy for the kids (school’s out, anyway) and, very often, a sport for the adults. You can see groups of people going for target practice, some were shooting at the cross of the Saranda church in the middle of the day, joking at each other, some other – a dozen of well dressed Albanians – had set up a roadblock with Mercedes and jeeps in the highland road between Vouno and Cheimara, and did target practice, not having in mind that some car might appear from the side of the road they were shooting at. Those less involved in guns just use them for self defence. They don’t show them off and most of them keep them at home, just in case of a robbery. However, the Albanians were armed and well acquainted to guns in the past, too. The revolt just gave them the opportunity to replace their guns with more modern ones.

During daytime, the kalashnikov shots are rather scarce. They shoot from the paved with stones Saranda coastal road towards the sea, they shoot from the hills around, they shoot from the slope of Gjirokaster, from the small hill at the side of the Greek consulate, from the port of Vlore, here and there all the way to Fieri.

After 6 -7 p.m. every night, it looks like Greek Easter [when traditionally there’s a lot of fireworks]. The bursts of gunfire light the sea, they get more frequent or stop without apparent reason, sometimes some passer by gets shot or a hotel glass is broken. We are sitting inside the “luxury” hotel by the seaside of Vlore staring at the spectacle of shots and flashes which is rather a festival of joy to the participants in it.

It’s really hard to believe that the fear and terror inflicted by the gun which means death at the hands of an “official” of some “established” authority has become an ordinary and inseparable element of “life” in the Albanian communities, that the gun has become fun and source of an absurd pleasure.

Roadblocks in a journey in time

Going from another country to Albania, and especially Albania after the revolt, or from an Albanian town to another looks rather like travelling in time than in space. It is hard for someone who's grown up in the modern world to believe what he sees, images that would rather belong to the '20s along with familiar ones from modern western Europe: a Land Rover and an ox and a plough side by side, a Mercedes stops for a cow to cross the road, the kitsch modern hotel near a social realism-style apartment building, a cabrio Mercedes passing in front of a half empty "grocery" shed, the egg-like pill-boxes, remains of the Hoxha period, lined up in the midst of the plain of Dropolis, which no one cultivates, a traditionally dressed old woman under a palm-tree with a mobile phone in her hands, an MP writing in his portable p.c. inside a room built of stones and decorated with icons and pieces of traditional embroidery, some people digging trying to make a field to cultivate in a stone-dry slope in the middle of nowhere, someone has written "AC/DC" on the wall in Gjirokaster, elaborate arches made of stone near the blown up bridge outside Saranda, tanks, army tracks and anti-tank weaponry left in the middle of the road to Vlore, and everywhere, in every road, there are Mercedes and less frequently jeeps, speeding like hell in narrow roads full of turns and potholes. Everywhere, contradiction and absurdity in their extreme: Lusnia, Tepelen, Fieri, Vlore. Very often it's difficult to distinguish between what was destroyed, looted and half-ruined during the insurgence and what had always been like that. If someone didn't show the visitor the bank that was destroyed by the rebels, he wouldn't realise it, simply because the next building looked exactly the same. A totally ruined landscape, Hoxha's rusty oil-wells, abandoned ruins of factories that once produced food, clothes, paints, whole blocks of derelict brick buildings, gas stations belonging to the state oil company Adi Petrol (directly involved with the pyramid schemes) that look as if they had been bombed, electricity power stations in the midst of residential areas, recently laid cement foundations with the characteristic cloth dummy on the roof, to protect inhabitants of the "evil eye", Kokkalis' telephones in the phone company's building in Vlore, which is beyond description.

And in the midst of all these, the roadblocks. Despite many people saying that they are less now and things are relatively quiet, the roadblocks are identified in a traveller's mind with the unknown, the danger and the inconceivable. The people blocking the road could be anything, despite looking more or less the same. It could be rebels from Saranda who check who enters the town, grim faces and kalashnikov in hand – but burst into laughers and hog the Albanian who escorts us, a celebrity of Greek TV broadcasts – but let you go without paying any attention to you. It could be an armed group who stop you in the middle of a "rough" route at the side of the Adriatic, at a highland isolated spot outside Cheimara, and just want to rob you. When they recognise our escorts, they greet them warmly, talk loudly making gestures and give the impression that they have agreed on something and we'll all be going together. But then they get in their jeeps and Mercedes and leave the other way. The answer to our questions is typical: "What are you asking for? You keep on asking all the time. It's none of your business". Some time later, we were told those were the toughest "Mafiosi" of Vlore.

It could also be a "mixed" roadblock consisting of Albanians in plain clothes armed with kalashnikovs and some unarmed in police uniforms outside Vlore, who ask the bus driver something and that's all, or a roadblock of armed policemen – who didn't flee after the rebellion – in a town very close to Vlore, Fieri. It could be a roadblock outside Kakavia who want to rob you but don't shoot if you don't stop, they might want something specific, like a spare tire on the way to

Vouno, or a group of people armed with kalashnikovs who — all of a sudden — decided to check the road to Tepelen or Lousnia. On the way from Saranda to Vlore, through Lousnia, Tepelen and Fieri, there are many abandoned roadblocks with tanks, anti-tank weapons and logs at the side of the road. At Emalie, the tank was parked in the midst of the road, while on the roads to the Greek minority villages of Dropolis, there are tanks placed by the villagers who patrol the area in groups and inform the others when they see anyone in Mercedes coming.

“Now there’s war”

This is the phrase most rebels keep on repeating, a phrase which could be the answer to any question.

This peculiar “war” consists not of clashes and battles, but of life routines and attitudes accustomed to an every day life of general inaction and ceaseless dealings.

At the squares and the main streets of the towns in the revolted South, you can see people hanging around, chatting in small groups in the corners of Saranda, playing cards under the trees of Flabouri square in Vlore, strolling in front of the stalls with shoes, clothes, cigarettes and some food that constitute some sort of marketplace along the way to Fieri, exchanging money (dollars, marks, drachmas to lek) by the port of Vlore.

Everyone is broke, everyone had invested in the pyramids and lost their money.

Xzaferi, Vefa, Galitsa, Kamberi... names you hear all the time in Albania. Pyramid schemes — in fact, private banks- where about two billion dollars were lost, the savings of Albanians and Greek minority who sold their houses, their herds, who invested the money their children sent them from Greece and Italy, attracted by the bait of interest as high as 35 to 100% per month. The Greek who had a “quarry” lost 25.000.000 drs [270 drs = 1dollar], the old woman in Dervitsani lost 2 to 3.000.000, the Albanian with the sweet shop lost 10.000.000, another one who used to work in Crete lost 5.000.000...

Berisha won the fraud elections of 1996, with the slogan: “Vote for Democratic Party and you will profit”. Of course, the Greek secret service, journalists and diplomats, just before the outbreak of the rebellion, still considered the Albanians as obeisants and incapable of reacting. “We want our money back. Out with Berisha”, this is all most people have to do with politics in revolted Albania.

However, it seems that everybody makes it, each in his own way. Of course, almost nobody has a “normal” job, since services, factories and shops are closed down, but on the other hand, naturally you can find all sorts of businesses which usually thrive in similar situations. A hotel room cost as much as 50.000 drs during the period of the “journalistic boom”, and a drive that used to cost 5.000 drs went up to 45.000. We didn’t encounter any miserable and starving people -at least in the sense of western societies. Perhaps there is shortage of basic goods in some remote villages and most hospitals still functioning can hardly deal with emergency cases. It is a fact though that strong family bonds “impose” mutual aid that makes for example an Albanian who meets a distant cousin in a bus to give him his money.

It’s no coincidence that nobody asked us for anything, we could nowhere see a sign of beggary. The only thing they kept on asking — and this only after having got to knowing us for some time — was if we could help them get a passport. It is difficult for someone who sees the paranoid grey jail-like apartment buildings built during Hoxha regime, the dumps surrounding them and

the sheds where people live, to realise how truly hospitable, friendly and warm-hearted most of their inhabitants are. Some of the Mercedes drivers opened the doors for us to get in, not out of servility but of sheer gentleness, some others offered us from coffee and whisky to hashish, unselfishly – and insistently. Two women in Saranda -two of the most miserable figures – led us to a shed-cafe, ordered two caps of coffee for us, paid and left. An Albanian friend often talked about “bessa” (credibility, keeping one’s word), kept on saying that we shouldn’t worry because now we were his “sisters”. This man seemed to have good relationship with everyone, protested strongly in a restaurant in Gjirokaster when he thought that we had been overcharged 2.000 drs, he had done six years in jail during Hoxha regime for he had been caught while trying to cross the border, he was afraid for his life, he got around everywhere, he suggested that we did some “business” with oil at the border, he used to be a track driver in the army, he wanted to visit Volos (town in central Greece) again and drink “tsipouro” (local liquor), he was a rebel.

But what about women? Women are almost non-existent in revolted southern Albania. Only a few walk in the streets, some work in the shacks-grocery stores, a few work in the fields while some others – young ones – serve at the cafes, smileless and unapproachable. However, the well known gross, hungry or even exploratory look is non-existent, though this changes as one goes north. Many Albanians laugh at the rumour about women kidnapped and taken to Italy. Considering the strong family bonds and the wide family circle, it’s rather ridiculous to think that it’s so easy to kidnap wives, daughters and sisters.

“Albanian mafia”, “commandante”, Salvation Committees and a strange police

The only mafia that ever existed in Albania, with the meaning of organised crime with its own hierarchy and a specific action plan, was the state. It was Berisha’s regime supported the private banks, the para-banks – money laundry schemes-, it was Berisha’s regime intimidated the whole population of the country with the aid of SHIK (secret police) agents, it was Berisha’s regime dismissed its own officers -even the minister of Defense – and imprisoned some of the bank owners when he realised things were getting out of hand, it was Berisha’s regime that brutally beat, tortured, imprisoned or murdered people demanding their money back, students on hunger strike inside Gjirokaster university, the unscrupulous and paranoid Berisha himself probably ordered the army, police and SHIK to withdraw from all cities of the south. The overwhelming majority of politicians, Albanian and Greek minority altogether, was more or less accomplices to this mafia state. Almost everyone talks about mayors, councillors, chairmen, Omonia and Human Rights Party (organisation and political party respectively, representing Greek minority) officials who made money selling from guns and heroin to visas and passports. The Greek embassy and consulate were also involved.

The idea of the “Albanian mafioso” sounds simplistic and ridiculous in the insurgent Albanian south and is most of the times identified with that of the “Albanian insurgent”. Are those who threatened a café owner (brother of a SHIK agent), told him to leave and blast his shop with grenades when the guards he had hired in the meantime started shooting, “Albanian Mafiosi”?

Are those who shot a woman for not giving them her passport and money at a roadblock on the way from Kakavia to Mouzitsa “Albanian Mafiosi”? Are those who unload contraband cigarettes at the port of Saranda “Albanian Mafiosi”?

Are those who sell protection to cafés and restaurants for 30.000 drs a month — the toughest, still smiling most of the time — , those who are involved in heroin contraband, those who keep a note of how much whiskey they drink and later come back to the owner of the bar with the double quantity — stolen, of course — , those who would die to protect you if they have “taken responsibility” for you, “Albanian Mafiosi”? Are those who break into houses whose inhabitants have fled and empty them “Albanian Mafiosi”? Are the hooded gunmen who killed 17 people in Levan “Albanian Mafiosi” -or maybe Berisha’s agents, as everyone says they are? Is the bar owner who cocks an eye, saying “If you dig hash or anything, let me know”, an “Albanian mafioso”?

And what about Apostolis the illiterate, one of the toughest and most stout fellows in the area, who says burning the library was a stupid thing to do, while drinking coffee with his guns on the table of the hotel? And he adds smiling, a dialogue that sounds unbelievable but is very true:

- We still got one of them. Not far from here. Jailed.
- Who is he?
- He’s a SHIK agent. He was a driver in SHIK.
- What are you going to do to him?
- Shoot him. Bang, bang!
- Hey, don’t, this is stupid. If it had happened in a fight, it would be o.k. But shoot him like that...He’s human after all.
- All right. But then, what should we do with him? If we don’t shoot him now, he might come back sometime later and shoot me. Can’t you see?

What is Apostolis?

When we ask him what a “commandante” is, the answer is: “Whatever you say you are, that’s what you are. Isn’t this what you say in Greece?”

Tchevat, a middle-aged ex-general and representative of Vefa para-bank in Saranda -whom some named as “head of the committees of the insurgent cities”- hangs around the hotels where the journalists stay escorted by a dozen of armed men. He might ask for a mobile phone and keep it all night long. He is supposed to be a “tough guy” who neither himself nor his men will give up their weapons, unless Berisha is ousted. On the contrary, his “colleague” in town, Fouat, a hotel owner, former police head during Hoxha regime and “chief of people’s police” until ten days ago, when he quit, says he supported the rebellion of the people, but cannot tolerate the current “state of anarchy and crime”. He adds that he supports the new Fino government, that a new police force has to be formed in order to avoid a bloodshed, and that he’s looking forward for the arrival of the multinational force. He still gets around with armed escorts.

Another commandante was Berti Siouti, in Vlore, who seemed to influence many people at the beginning of the rebellion, but three weeks later he was supported by about 5.000 pensioners out of a total population of 100 to 120.000. Vlore was the only town where people still gathered every morning at the central square but attendance was very reduced. In all other towns of the South there were no “Salvation Committees” nor people’s gatherings.

In Gjirokaster people were talking of Akim Gozita, a middle aged ex Hoxha army officer, and of Fatos Beta, Gozita’s friend and ex Berisha’s advisor. The only person that seemed to be of some

influence was Gioleka from Tepelen, an illiterate but energetic and tough young man, who used to be a thug at a café. Last, people mentioned dervish Pelumb (which means dove), commandante in Balsi, who was murdered, probably by SHIK agents. It is difficult to have a clear picture of what's happening in each area, because the situation is unstable and it's impossible to gather information from away.

In any case, you could feel that people were tired of the current situation, still determined not to give up arms unless Berisha is ousted. The gatherings at the squares had faded away, most of the commandants had no more power than any leader of a small armed group, while many people had lost hope and just wanted to flee from the country. In the Greek minority villages of Dropolis and Cheimara there were mostly old men who "guarded their houses". At the grocery store in Dervitsani, everyone said they had lost their money and had massively participated in the demonstrations, while Doules, a deputy of the Human Rights Party, said that "there is a total political impasse, as long as Berisha maintains control of the parliament. The only feasible solution is the assignment of a European police force in order to restore order".

There have been a few efforts to "restore order", that is form some sort of police — like the gathering of a handful of people, mostly ex-policemen, in Gjirokaster, ten days ago, and in Saranda, too — that failed completely. Vlore is the only exception. There, you could enter the police station — which the insurgents had raided in the beginning of the rebellion but found no one inside — without any check at the entrance and talk to the new police chief, whose "modern" office was among many empty rooms at the end of the staircase. He used to be a police chief for eighteen years, before Berisha took on power, and started with four policemen who had come from Tirana, with the approval of Fino's government. He wouldn't disclose the current number of his police force, but admitted that only 30% of them were armed — you could see on some posts around town posters asking citizens to hand one of their weapons to the police — and said their main task was to protect public services. The chief assured us that the police is respected by the insurgents and that he often talks to commandante Berti. Three hours later, five hooded men armed with kalashnikovs stole a Mercedes parked outside the police station. Three officers chased them and got killed at a nearby village, Kali Troyes. The following day, at 7 a.m., there were a dozen men, no hoods and kalashnikov in hand, outside Vlore's hospital who let no one in. One of the "hooded ones", who had been injured during last night's fight, was inside.

The "gazetarians"

The four young smiling Albanians with the kalashnikovs were changing cars every half an hour and hanging around town. Some time, they brake suddenly, the driver pulls down the car window and asks: "Everything all right?"

"Just fine. How about you? Are you from town? What's your name?" "What, haven't you seen me on T.V.?" In fact, he was a favourite of Greek T.V. stations, like the tank driver in Saranda who recalled his dialogue with the Sky -Greek T.V.- reporter and laughed to tears ("Where are you from?"

"Tepelen." "And what about this, Tepelen, too?" "No, the tank is a native. I am from Tepelen".) Many Saranda inhabitants have many funny stories to tell us about the "lives and times" of the gazetarians, since Saranda was the easier accessible town and many Greek reporters had passed from there.

Like how they used to hang out at the corners of the square at 8.30 p.m., – the time the evening news bulletins start-, posed in front of the cameras and the “special envoys” kalashnikov in hand, fired some shots at their request and then everyone left the square. Or like the gazetarian who paid one million drachmas to get that “exclusive” reportage about the “hashish production factory”. They talked about their habits, how brave or chicken they were or how much they were paid. Of course, everyone watched regularly the Greek news – even in the poorest houses there was a satellite antenna – and made jokes of “fat” Evert and Kostas Karamanlis [Greek politicians]. In the northern and western areas (like Vlore) they used to watch italian T.V.

The journalists constituted a considerable “source of income” for Mercedes drivers and escorts -since they were the only who moved from town to town-, for hotel and café owners, and in some cases for those who set up roadblocks.

Most of the insurgents said that the gazetarians “exaggerated and told lies over the news”. For example, the Dutch reporter, who had been recently shot in Saranda, used to run a tourist agency in town, five years now. After three weeks of “journalistic raids”, one of the elderly Albanians sitting at the café asked angrily the reporter who was taking a photo of him from a distance: “Hey, mister, did you ask before taking a picture?”

Dialogue 1

Old Aristides has been a taxi driver for twenty years. He accepted to take us for a drive most others had refused.

- What happened here with the pyramids?
- They took everything. All the money from seven villages was invested in them during the past four years. Marks, dollars, drachmas, everything.
- Where did all that money go?
- Beats me. They spent it. I used to carry 120 to 130 millions every three days.
- Where to?
- I took them to the state bank in Vlore. That’s why I was fooled, too. I put my money in them, too. I deposited 37 million Albanian money and 2.186.000 Greek money. They took it all and now we’re finished. I don’t know why I’ve been working, why I was born. One thief came after another, always thieves.
- Is there anyone who got any money back?
- Some did in the beginning. Then the money ran out. I gave my money to Xzaferi and he stole it all. That’s because people trusted Berisha, who was claiming that the banks will make the world a whole lot better, make Albania better. You see?
- And now what’s going on in Cheimara, have you all took guns?
- It’s hell. Like a war.

- Do you know those who burst into houses?
 - Of course. We tried to organise police here, but people are scared. Albania is now as it was 150 to 200 years ago.
 - Where do people work now?
 - There are no jobs. A young man's got nowhere to work, no visa, so he has no choice but steal.
 - Is there a consulate in Cheimara?
 - There is an Omonia office. They give visas.
- Do they take money for the visas?
- This is mafia. They take money from everyone.
 - Do you have a passport?
 - I did. I had it right here in my pocket and they stole it from me, along with my driving license.
 - Do you receive any of the food aid?
 - No. Absolutely nothing. People here have suffered a lot. Life conditions are squalid.

A couple of days later, some men robbed old Aristides and took his car and money.

Dialogue 2

The tape recorder is playing "Hotel California" in full volume. The kalashnikovs are leaned against the gear lever and the two Albanians, the toughest in the area, which also means the safest to escort you, have revolvers in their belts. The Mercedes is speeding like hell.

- Have you been to Greece?
- Yes, I've been in Corinthos.
- Did you work there?
- No. I used to drive a speedboat. At sea. Right. Hashish, heroin. Contraband. But no more. Now we'll be going from home to work, and that's all.
- Had you put money in the pyramids?
- Yes, to Xzaferi. 5.000.000 drachmas.
- Now, what's going on here, is there still any heroin?
- Yes, the factory is around here.

- And do many people here shoot heroin?
- No , it all goes to Italy or Athens.
- How much does it cost?
- It's expensive. 3.500 drachmas per gram.
- What is this?
- It's a TT. It's Chinese. And this one is a Kalash(nikov). Now there's misery here, now there's war.
- Do you communicate with people from other areas?
- No. But we're all in town united against Berisha.
- Are there any women here? We haven't seen any.
- There's war. They're hidden. Like in Greece during 1965–66. It's only five years that we have democracy here.
- Have any weapons been smuggled to Italy or Greece?
- No, not now. There's war now. We have war for our money.
- What are you going to do with the elections?
- We're against Berisha.
- Are you going to vote for a representative of yours?
- We don't know. We don't do politics.
- Who is the commandante now? Is it Tchevat?
- There is no commandante. Now this is commandante (he points at his gun).
- This morning there was a roadblock outside town. What was it for?
- Control. To see who's coming, who he is, who he works for, if he has money, everything...

The Albanian March

The armed popular insurrection against the corrupt regime of Sali Berisha that took Albania by storm during the first three weeks of March, makes us give it the characterisation of Albanian March. The insurgents of the South forced the totalitarian regime of the Albanian president Sali Berisha to enormous retreats and strategic sink.

On Thursday the 13th of March, the Albanian state, identified with Berisha's mechanism, has been reduced to a few square metres around the centre of Tirana and namely the Desmoret avenue. The presidential palace and the governmental buildings were all there, in both sides of the

avenue. The insurgent areas of the Albanian capital were only four kilometres away and the most fluid power's state that tended to the limits of a gap lasted nearly twenty hours. The sensation of the geometrical disruption of the state authority made you speculate its impending and total collapse. After the delay of the three previous days, the northern praetorians got organised and armed under the leadership of the notorious Saban Memia. The SHIK secret services and its head, Baskim Gazidante, were Berisha's second source of support. His protection circle is strengthened by his presidential guard, consisting of the most close, faithful and related people. The terror in the northern suburbs of Tirana and the threat of a possible massacre give the ex-communists an excuse to change their policy, in fear of a popular wave of insurrection they couldn't control. These critical hours, the ex-communists, have decided optics and practice.

The organising secretary of the Socialist Party, Dokle – who had repressed the opposition's mobilizations when he was the all powerful minister of Interior, in Hoxha's regime – is very specific declaring that the Socialists are against violent and armed actions and that they seek the constitutional legitimacy of their movements. In this way they choose to compromise with Berisha and to undertake to cover the power's gap with the machinery of the ex-Hoxha's Secret Services, Sigourim. It is very clear that the ex-communists, with the experience and the tradition of the development of power mechanisms, they exploited the popular insurrection's dynamics, they saved the power system in Albania and they became the governmental partner of Berisha's Democratic Party. That's how a complex balance setting is formed: a multiform power struggle and the South decided to satisfy its demands.

From Hoxha's regime to Berisha's

After the elections of March 1992 and Berisha's accession to power, a new dominating group was formed, mainly from the northern areas of the country and Berisha's native region, that became the new cadres potential of the new Albanian power. It was a machinery of praetorians, suzerains in Tirana, with two parts: the members of the Democratic Party and the state machinery and the SHIK Secret Services. A machinery of massive terrorism. The Albanians believed in the new age that supposedly started with the political change in '92, but soon they saw their dreams, not only betrayed, but also dispersed in one night. A whole generation (majority of the Albanian people) that was raised during Hoxha's regime, believed in the false dream of the capitalistic democracy. On the contrary, they suffered from misery, poverty, emigration, racism abroad and police state in the interior. The piramidical para-banking forms, where they invested not only their dreams but also their economies looked as the only way out. Instead of better days, they watched the "country of eagles" being transformed into a "country of vultures".

The great inequality and the interweaving interests between government officials and mafiozos, transformed Albania to a huge arena of arms and drugs contraband (with the participation of police and military forces), as well as fuel and cigarettes contraband (with the participation of cadres of the Democratic Party and the government -e.g. Skiponia company) and a washing tank of dirty money. At the opposite side, there were the masses, the agrarian population and the proletarians.

The beginning of the end

Things started to become clear after the elections of fraud and violence, of the 26th of May 1996 and the first signs that outlined the interweaving interests and the prospect of the impending end of the pyramids. The beginning of the end is marked by the report of the International Monetary Fund that pointed out the risk of collapse and threatened the government with a financial rupture between the I.M.F. and Albania. In December, the first para-bank, “Shoudia”, goes bankrupt and in January, two more, “Jaferi” and “Populit”, close down. The first manifestations took part in Vlore, on January 16, with the participation of simple men, immigrants and middle class.

The Albanians, who shared up their money for a better future with such a hard work, when they realised that they had been robbed by a caste of people and, since they had nothing to lose any more, they transformed their desperation and bitterness to rage against the corrupted and interweaving power of Berisha’s regime. The more extensively they felt the exploitation, the more massively and dynamically they rose up against Berisha’s totalitarian regime that they considered as the exclusive responsible of the fraud against the whole of the Albanian people. At the debris of such a country, one cannot protest neither with marches, nor with whistles.

Kalashnikov becomes the symbol of the Albanian people who, without any ideological base or political formation, took the lead in their life and made an evident popular insurrection threatening directly the regime. Their intentions were manifestly expressed in an event that took place in Loushnia, on January 25th, when enraged habitants attacked the president of the Democratic Party, and vice-president of the government, Tritan Shehu, and pilloried him to public with a leek in his mouth and a second one in his ass. Clashes between policemen and demonstrators took place in Tirana. On January the 30th, the opposition’s parties formed the “Forum for Democracy”, that is the party umbrella of the protest. On February the 6th, began the citizen’s attacks to police stations in Vlore, but the insurrection culminated during the night of the 28th of February to the 1st of March, with the massive conflicts between citizens and governmental forces and the first entry in the army camp, in Vlore.

March with insurrections in Albania

On the 2nd of March, Berisha imposes contingency plans and declares that he doesn’t have to confront a simple protest, but whole areas of the country that are hostile. The party opposition – that participated with few forces in the two-month mobilizations – demanded a caretaker government composed by technocrats, that would lead to a holding elections. The situation reminds Latin-American regimes. The public gatherings of over four persons are forbidden, the circulation between 8:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. is prohibited, police is free to fire and the press is restricted: the two government newspapers that are being published and the governmental T.V. are the only sources of information.

Tirana are being terrorised by the police and many areas of the south are no more under the control of the military and police forces. The imposition of the contingency plans is undertaken by a mixed repressive force: the armed units of the Ministry of the Interior, the SHIK Secret Services and the ZABIST police anti-riot squads, under the leadership of Baskim Gazidede, an ex-mathematician and president of the Muslim Intellectuals’ Association, who was promoted to a general.

On Wednesday, the 5th of March, the government recognised the problem that there was in Saranda, Vlore, Delvin and Fieri, and blamed the units' commanders as well as the General Chief of the Army Force, Seme Kosova, whom it sends away. This day is quite important as the governmental forces seemed unable to control the south.

The governmental military operations in Delvin – aiming to interrupt the communication between Saranda and Gjirokaster – failed completely and so, the insurgent areas could easily be unified. The uncontrolled and confused situation is the first thing that threatens the Albanian power as well as its several western supports. On the same day, the voice of the American capital, the Washington's newspaper "Wall Street Journal", compares the situation in Albania with the riot in Los Angeles and tries to present the insurgents as instigated by the ex-communists and the mafia. But, unfortunately for them, this is not the truth. It's a whole world that took the arms, not to play, but to level them at Berisha's regime. The lack of political formations of this popular insurrection influenced its formation and allowed the opposition party to make the first step towards an agreement with the Albanian president, on the 6th of March.

Organisation steps of the insurgents

The determination of the insurgents leads them to form the popular salvation committees, where they demand specific requests: all their financial reimbursements, the formation of a caretaker multi-party government, the holding of new elections and the voting of a new Constitution and a new electoral law. At the same time they try to form some procedures for the provisioning and the defence of their insurgent areas. On the 8th of March, Berisha receives a severe blight as he is unable to control Gjirokaster, where the military units are dispersed.

Agreement of the parties with Berisha

On Sunday the 9th of March, as Berisha is incapable to control the situation in the south and to maintain the control of the north, he proceeds to an extreme retreat and agrees to the formation of a caretaker government with the participation of all parties that will hold the new elections in three months (June). He also demands the surrender of the arms. Nothing for the money of the people who reject the agreement, since the problem of the return of their money is not solved and the person that symbolises their lost – that is Berisha – remains.

South: treason

The insurgents accuse the politicians and the parties that signed the agreement with Berisha that they are "interested only in their power and not in the people who are the losers" (Committee of Vlore) and denounce them as traitors. That's why it is not strange that he wave of the insurrection becomes an avalanche that spreads with the massive disobedience of the military and the police forces. Sali Berisha, panicked and startled, seems to beg the opposition for help, as the ring tightens up around Tirana. So, he offers the prime-ministry to the Socialists, something incredible until then.

When the insurgents, first in the city of Vlore, made clear that they would not accept any agreement that would not include the commitment for their money and the removal of Berisha.

At the same time, from Gjirokaster, the insurgent areas emit the invitation for the formation of citizens' councils in every town and village that will undertake the management of their defence and declare their political presence as a third pole.

On Tuesday the 11th of March, the front of the left governmental forces and the insurgents, form an arc from Blishan to Balshi, Klitsova and South Erbashan, 90 km from Tirana. Berisha, when he realises that nothing can stop the extension — spreading (and not development) of the insurrections and the threat for the Albanian capital and his own life, he puts into practice the plan of preparedness for armed conflict with the employment of terror by the Secret Services and the members of the Democratic Party -mainly from the North. The same night, as tracks with armed Berishians agitate Tirana, everyone can understand what's going to happen next.

Thursday the 13th of March: the most critical day

On Thursday the 13th of March, the insurrections approach the Albanian capital. Around Tirana and on the road to the airport and Durres, you can hear all day long shootings while there is complete inexistence of all government, military and police forces. The tension of the day was so high, that we felt, moment by moment, the wave that was approaching. At noon, we witnessed the entry of thousands of citizens to the camps at the fringes of Tirana.

Everyone — but everyone — included in one phrase, all their demands: “Our money and the head of Berisha”. It is Characteristic that I heard many people saying that “tonight we will play football with his head”. We could see clearly the abolition of every governmental, military and police power and it was a matter of hours to watch the popular insurrection arrive in the centre of Tirana. We had the feeling that that night would be the most critical. Who could stop this momentum? The praetorians of Berisha's regime undertake the defence, through the practice of terrorisation at the suburbs of Tirana, where they are organised in gangs of armed murderers of a blood thirsty master.

Tirana: field of conflicts/ Turn of the Socialists

Around the presidential building, where Berisha is being guarded, and the Desmoret avenue, where all the governmental buildings are, the shootings are continuous and the tanks are deafening. At these moments, socialists' politics lead to the compromise with Berisha, from which they don't demand to resign but they “earn” the participation in the government, the constitutional legality and the official pardon to their imprisoned socialist leader, Fatos Nano, who had escaped in the meanwhile. The former Sigiourim undertakes the task of covering the power gap and the new government of Baskim Fino decides, on Friday the 14th, the formation of a new police force and invites ex and actual cadres as well as new persons to participate. The target of the plan is the reformation of an elementary machinery of control. The attempts of the new government aim the formation of new institutional procedures, new power mechanisms and new state and governmental functions. The ex-opposition and now government is clearly dissociated of the insurgents and threatens them with violent repression if the effort to incorporate the salvation committees into local management structures fails (that is to regional power centres) Meanwhile, all the prisons open and the prisoners pour out. In the prison where Fatos Nano had been held

when he was in danger — because of the Berishians — there were the penal prisoners that defended him, under the leadership of Nehat Koula.

After three days, it seems that the balance between the opponent forces is being stabilised, but also that a multiform power struggle is being expressed. The situation is very fluid, with more variables than constants.

Omissions, delays and dissension with the South

On one side, the Socialists and the members of the Democratic Party express different opinions and on the other, the new government confirms its dissension with the south. Berisha, who has confined with his presidential guard, seems to want to intervene in the new government. That's why some people start to say that Berisha is back. The measures for the restoration of the order and the public functions are materialized with difficulty and Bashkim Fino declares that he doesn't accept ultimatum for the satisfaction of the demands. Many people support that the new government doesn't worth a thing without the south and the start to stammer out a few words about mistakes, omissions and slow paces that permitted Berisha not only to consolidate his position, but also to proceed to a display of power.

On Thursday the 20th of March, he commits a blight upon Fino's government, by rejecting from the parliament — which is under control of the Democratic Party — the governmental proposals for the lifting of the press restraints and the transmission of the state-TV and Radio's supervision from the Parliament to the new government

Manifesto of the 18 insurgent areas

On the 28th of March, delegations from the 18 insurgent areas and the salvation committees, vefilate the insurgents' manifesto:

- they denounce the claims that consider their insurrection as being instigated by foreign centres — they don't accept the parliament as representative legislative body and demand the formation of a new organisation that will express the free will of the people
- they support Fino's government but demand its total independence and Berisha's ousting.
- they invite the government and the parties to cooperate with the Salvation committee, in order to form the public management and the executive power
- they demand the participation of the Salvation Committees to the conference table of the political parties (a kind of informal council of political leaders)

As an epilogue

The epilogue has not been written yet. However, history has recorded that people rose up by arms against a totalitarian and corrupted regime of exploitation and power. Every Berisha's step of retreat constitutes a victorious action for the insurgents.

In Albania nothing is definitely decided. Hard times are just beginning, now that the momentum that could sweep away everything — even if nothing has been planned — is inhibited. What matters now is the resistance to time, the determination and the capabilities of each side.

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Holidays in Albania
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This is the first of two articles written by two collaborators of "Alpha", a weekly Greek anarchist paper and published in issue 89, 7 April 1997

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