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# **The 2013 Parliamentary Elections in Albania: Lights and Shadows**

Election Analysis

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# The 2013 Parliamentary Elections in Albania: Lights and Shadows

Blendi Kajsii\*

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## **The Context: The Odd, the strange, and the unbelievable**

The parliamentary elections in Albania took place on 23 June 2013. They marked the end of a turbulent mandate, 2009-2013, by an odd ruling coalition between the biggest right wing political force, the Democratic Party (DP) led by Sali Berisha, and the second largest left wing party the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) led by Ilir Meta. The coalition was odd because the two leaders before 2009 had been bitter political enemies who for years had accused each-other of corruption, authoritarianism, and connections with organized crime. In fact the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI), a 2003 splinter group from the Socialist, had run on an anti-Berisha campaign during the 2009 elections. Therefore, when the SMI and its leader Meta formed a coalition with the Democratic Party after the 2009 elections, that enabled Berisha to stay in power as Prime Minister, many who had voted for Meta and SMI as the true left-wing opposition were surprised and disappointed.

This odd ruling coalition gave rise to strange and chaotic political developments. The two former political enemies Berisha and Meta displayed exemplary political loyalty towards each-other sustaining a very stable and united ruling coalition throughout the period 2009-2013. The ruling coalition withstood many bitter political confrontations with the main opposition Socialist Party. The latter, while recognizing that the ruling coalition had received the majority of votes, boycotted the parliament and organized massive protests following the refusal of the Central Elections Commission in 2009 to recount votes in some contested election centres, which did not affect the overall results anyway. The tensions between the ruling DP-SMI coalition and the opposition Socialist Party peaked in January 2011 when a video was transmitted in the media showing Ilir Meta participating in a corruptive affair with the Minister of the Economy.<sup>1</sup> Following the scandal the opposition Socialist Party organised on 21 January 2011, a major protest in front of the prime minister's office, which escalated into violent confrontations between the demonstrators and the police. Eventually four protesters were shot dead by the Republican Guard in front of the Prime Minister's office. This event polarized the Albanian political scene to

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<sup>1</sup> Likmeta, Besar. 2011. *Albanian Deputy PM Resigns Amid Corruption Scandal*. *Balkan Insight*. (accessed: 17 December 2013).

the extreme as the opposition accused the ruling coalition and its two leaders Berisha and Meta of murder and corruption. The leader of the Socialist Party Edi Rama was particularly harsh on Ilir Meta and the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) calling them representatives of everything that was rotten in Albanian politics.<sup>2</sup>

However, two years later, in March 2013 the unbelievable happened. The Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) left the ruling coalition and on 1 April 2013, joined the Socialist Party in a coalition called the Alliance for European Albania. The two leaders, Edi Rama and Ilir Meta, who just a few months ago had been accusing each-other of corruption and murder decided to run together against the ruling Democratic Party and its leader Sali Berisha. This political move sent shock waves throughout the Albanian electorate and public scene. The Socialist Party that had promised a renaissance of Albanian values was now in bed with the person that it had identified as the symbol of government corruption, Ilir Meta. The SMI and Meta on the other hand, after being in power for four years were now part of the opposition's electoral campaign. Many political analysts interpreted this coalition as a purely pragmatic move to come to power, as the two parties together already had the majority of votes.<sup>3</sup> The SMI was the kingmaker that tipped the balance between the two main parties, the Democratic Party on the right and the Socialist Party on the left.

### **The 2013 Electoral Campaign**

Two main coalitions were competing in the 2013 parliamentary election; the Alliance for Employment Welfare and Integration led by the ruling Democratic Party (DP) and prime minister Sali Berisha, and the Alliance for a European Albania headed by the Socialist Party (SP) and the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI). In addition to the two main coalitions there were two new independent parties that promised to change the Albanian political scene; the New Democratic Spirit a splinter groups from the ruling Democratic Party led by the former president Bamir Topi and the Red and Black Alliance a nationalist party that seemed to attract important following during the electoral campaign through a heated nationalist rhetoric.

There was deep disagreement between the two main camps over electoral institutions. Once the Parliament dismissed a representative of the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) from the Central Elections Commission (CEC) in March 2013, on highly questionable legal grounds, the opposition Socialist Party withdrew its three representatives.<sup>4</sup> This in turn undermined the legal functioning of the Central Elections Commission (CEC) as it was operating only with the representatives of the ruling party. The incident was a reflection of the high level of mistrust and tension between the two camps. It did not bode well for the electoral process as a CEC dominated by the ruling party lacked the credibility to certify election results or to resolve electoral disputes between

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<sup>2</sup> *Panorama*. 2013. [Rama në BBC: Berisha në gjyq? Ai mmban përgjegjësi morale e politike](#). 19 July. (accessed: 16 December 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Baze, Mero. 2013. Një rotacion që vjen nga dështimi i parimeve. *Tema*, 1 April, 1.

<sup>4</sup> OSCE/ODHIR. 2013. [Republic of Albania, Parliamentary Elections 23 June, 2013: OSCE/ODHIR Election Observation Mission Final Report](#), 5. (accessed: 17 December 2013).

the parties.

Nevertheless, the tension and mistrust between the two main political camps regarding electoral institutions did not spill over into the electoral campaign. By Albanian standards the electoral campaign was quite silent and the politicians were less confrontational compared to previous electoral campaigns. It seemed that Albania had achieved what EU had always demanded; less conflict, less political polarization, and more consensus. Yet, more than a sign of the emancipation of Albanian politics, this was a reflection of bizarre electoral alliances. The opposition Socialist Party could hardly intensify its anti-corruption campaign against the Socialist Movement for Integration (it's now major ally) whom it had formerly characterised as the government's 'most corrupt expression'. In fact some of the most problematic areas of governance that had been criticised by the opposition Socialist Party, such as the health sector, were controlled by SMI. For the same reason the ruling Democratic Party (DP) could not be harsh on an opposition coalition that included an important part of its governance. Finally, the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) could hardly condemn a government to which it had belonged for almost four years. Therefore, the campaign was quite dull as all the major parties seemed to hold merely electoral monologues and no debate took place between the leader of the opposition and the Prime Minister.

One beneficial outcome of the above paradoxical situation was a positive electoral campaign where the parties focused more on proposals rather than on mutual accusations. The ruling Democratic Party (DP) promised positive change and progress under its electoral motto "We are the change, Forward!" Its campaign was headed by Prime Minister Sali Berisha who focused on the achievements of the Government, especially on infrastructure, while promising more development for the future.<sup>5</sup> The opposition Socialist Party and its leader Edi Rama focused on the need for change while promising an Albanian renaissance that would revitalize democracy and economy, under the slogan "Renaissance: 2013 the year of change."<sup>6</sup> The Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI), on the other hand, ran under the neutral slogan 'Let's walk faster', promising faster development and quicker integration into EU. The positive electoral campaign enhanced the ideological distinctions between the two camps. Thus, the Socialist Party promised universal free health care and progressive taxation instead of the flat rate tax that was defended by the ruling right wing Democratic Party.<sup>7</sup> In this respect, at least, the electoral process "offered voters a genuine choice."<sup>8</sup>

### **Election Results: The Predictable and the Unexpected**

The Alliance for the European Albania led by the Socialist Party (SP) and the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) won a landslide victory in the Parliamentary Elections on 23 June 2013. It received 16% more votes (57.63%) than its rival coalition, the Alliance for Employment Welfare and Integration,

<sup>5</sup> Partia Demokratike. 2013. *Ceshtjet* (accessed: 16 December 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë. 2013. *Programi: Rimëkëmbja e Ekonomisë: Taksimi i Ndershëm*. (accessed: 16 December 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Partia Socialiste e Shqipërisë, *Programi*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> OSCE/ODHIR, *Republic of Albania*, 1.

led by the Democratic Party (DP). It received 83 out of 140 seats, securing thus a sound majority in Parliament. See Table 1 below.

Table 1: 2013 Parliamentary Election Results

Name of Party/Coalition	Number of Votes	Percentage	Seats in Parliament
The Alliance for the European Albania	993,904	57.63	83
The Socialist Party of Albania	713,407	41.36	65
The Socialist Movement for Integration	180,470	10.46	16
The Party Union for Human Rights	14,722	0.85	1
The Social Democracy Party	11,891	0.69	0
The Social-democratic Party of Albania	10,220	0.59	0
The Popular Alliance	8,927	0.52	0
The Christian Democratic Party of Albania	7,993	0.46	1
Other Parties	46,274	2.7	0
The Alliance for Employment Welfare and Integration	680,677	39.46	57
The Democratic Party	528,373	30.63	50
The Republican Party	52,168	3.02	3
The Party of Justice, Integration and Unity	44,957	2.61	4
The Demo-Christian Party of Albania	13,288	0.77	0
The Movement for Legality (Monarchy) Party	6,089	0.35	0
The Movement for National Development	5,429	0.31	0
Other Parties	30,373	1.76	0
The New Democratic Spirit	29,310	1.7	0
The Red and Black Alliance	10,196	0.59	0
Other Parties and Individuals	10,692	0.62	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,724 779</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>140</b>

Source: The Central Elections Commission. 2013a. 1

While most electoral polls had predicted the victory of the SP-SMI coalition, its extent took by surprise even the winners themselves. In a joint press conference before the elections on 21 June 2013, the leaders of SP and SMI, Edi

Rama and Ilir Meta declared that according to their calculations the SP-SMI coalition would win somewhere between 77 and 80 seats in the Albanian Parliament.<sup>9</sup> This figure was well below the 83 seats that their coalition actually won.

Besides the significant victory of the Alliance for a European Albania three other elements stood out in the 2013 election results. First, the low results of the two ‘alternative parties’, the New Democratic Spirit and the Red and Black Alliance, none which managed to win even a single seat in the Parliament. Second, the high score of the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI), which increased its vote and number of seats in Parliament from 4 in 2009 to 16 in 2013. Third, the low score of the ruling Democratic Party, which received eighty thousand votes less than in 2009, and lost 18 seats in Parliament. See Table 2 below for a summary of the electoral change between 2009 and 2013 elections.

Table 2: A Comparison of 2009 and 2013 Parliamentary Election Results

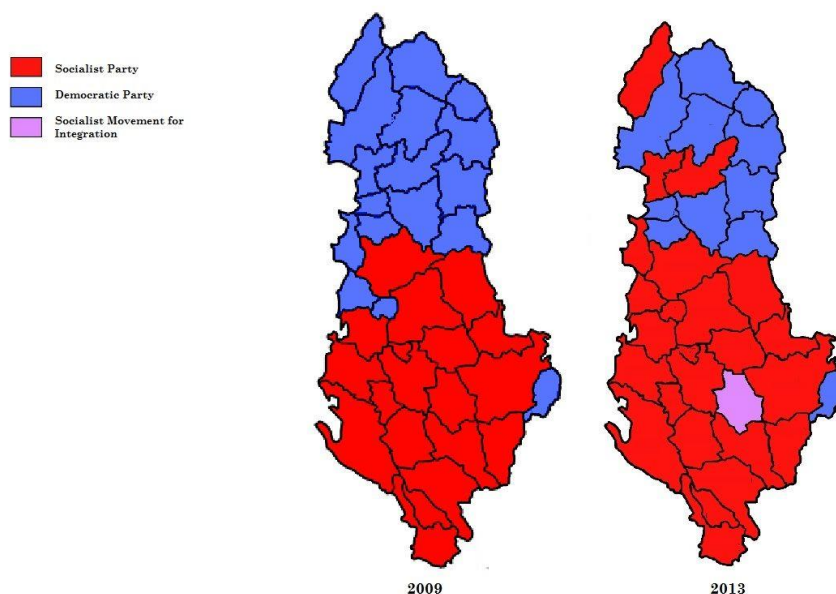
Name of Party/Coalition	Number of Votes		Percentage		Seats in Parliament	
	2009.	2013.	2009.	2013.	2009.	2013.
The Socialist Party	620,586	713,407	40.85	41.36	65	65
The Democratic Party	610,463	528,373	40.18	30.63	68	50
The Socialist Movement for Integration	73,678	180,470	4.85	10.46	4	16
The Socialist Party Coalition	688,748	993,904	45.34	57.63	66	83
The Democratic Party Coalition	712,745	680,677	46.92	39.46	70	57
Voter Turn-out	1,519 176	1,724 779	50.77	53.31	140	140

Source: Central Elections Commission. 2013a and 2013b; IIDEA. 2013.

As the above table shows the 2013 elections had a clear winner and a clear loser. The true winner of these elections was the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) that almost tripled its amount of votes from around seventy thousand in 2009 to hundred and eighty thousand in 2013, while also quadrupling its seats from four to sixteen. While it remains the third party, SMI consolidated its position as the kingmaker in Albanian politics. The Democratic Party (DP), on the other hand, was the clear loser as it lost eighty thousand votes and eighteen seats in Parliament. Furthermore, the Democratic Party (DP) lost in some of the northern districts that in the last 20 years had been its political strongholds. See Figure 1 below.

<sup>9</sup> *Tema*. 2013. *Rama-Meta, konferencë të përbashkët: Do mbrojmë cdo vote, fitojmë 77-80 mandate*, 21 June. (accessed: 16 December 2013).

Figure 1: Electoral map of Albania according to districts, 2009 and 2013.



Source: adapted from Electoral Geography.2013 a and b

The 2013 electoral map focuses on the three main parties individually rather than on the two competing coalitions. A focus on coalitions would show that the left wing coalition *Alliance for European Albania* led by the Socialist Party won the majority of votes (52,69%) in the biggest northern district of Shkoder, historically considered a stronghold of the right wing Democratic Party.<sup>10</sup>

The poor results of the ruling Democratic Party and the astounding electoral success of the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) provide the keys to understanding the 2013 election results. On the one hand the electoral result can be read as a strong vote of protest against the incumbent Prime Minister Berisha and the ruling Democratic Party. Berisha had not only become synonymous with the ruling Democratic Party as its indisputable and historical leader, he was also the sole protagonist of the Democratic Party campaign. Therefore, the poor electoral results of this party can be easily read as vote against Berisha, the government that he led and his authoritarian tendencies as he brought under control all major state institutions. In this respect the 2013 elections were a great democratic exercise. This would be the bright side of the 2013 election results. The electoral success of the Socialist Movement of Integration (SMI) however, which had been at the centre of some of the most serious corruption scandals of Berisha Government, casts a dark shadow on the 2013 election results. The electoral success of the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) could not be due to its performance in a Government that was penalized by the voters. It was most probably a consequence of its extensive politics of patronage through which SMI offered jobs in the public administration in exchange for votes.

<sup>10</sup> Central Elections Commission. 2013c. *Results: Zgjedhjet për kuvend 2013: Rezultatet përfundimtar në bazë të Zonave Zgjedhore*, 19. (accessed: 16 December 2013).

**Consequences of 2013 Elections: Lights and shadows.**

The 2013 Parliamentary elections produced two contradictory consequences with regard to democratic consolidation in Albania. On the one hand they can be seen as a sign of successful democratization. They marked the third peaceful transfer of power as well as the end of some regional political strongholds in Albania. In this respect the 2013 electoral process and its results could produce more electoral and substantive democracy in the future. On the other hand, the 2013 elections did not fully test the capacity of Albanian electoral institutions to handle electoral disputes. Furthermore, given the success of the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) the 2013 election results brought to light the increasing importance of clientilistic politics in Albania. This in turn, does not bode well for the future of anti-corruption policies in the country. In short, there was a bright side and a dark side to the 2013 elections.

On the bright side, the 2013 elections were a sign of consolidation of democracy in Albania insofar as they marked the third peaceful and uncontested transfer of power, albeit not consecutive, after the 1992, and 2005 elections. Despite the tense political climate and the conflict regarding the composition of the Central Elections Commission (CEC), the OSCE/ODHIR Election Observation Mission concluded that “the 23 June elections were competitive with active citizen participation throughout the campaign and genuine respect for fundamental freedoms.”<sup>11</sup> Besides one incident that resulted in the death of a party activist, the voting process was quite peaceful and orderly. Unlike most previous elections the counting process was also quite smooth and without incidents. Finally, the elections produced a peaceful transfer of power. In an unprecedented political gesture Sali Berisha, the historical and uncontested leader of the Democratic Party, congratulated his political opponent Edi Rama, head of the Socialist Party, for the victory and resigned from the leadership of the Democratic Party personally assuming responsibility for the loss.<sup>12</sup> Once elections ended during the period July - September 2013 there was a smooth transfer of power from the old government to the new one headed by Prime Minister Edi Rama.

Second, the 2013 elections redrew the electoral map of Albania undermining regional divisions and existing political stronghold. As Figure 1 above shows the Socialist Party won in some northern strongholds of the Democratic Party, undermining the north-south division of Albanian politics, north being the stronghold of the right and south of the left. In this respect the 2013 elections marked an emancipatory event in Albanian politics. They showed that the Albanian electorate did not necessarily vote along regional lines, which have been quite present in Albanian politics. The end of political strongholds promises to increase levels of political accountability since no party can rest assured that it would win a given electoral district no matter how it governed. In other words, the 2013 election results produced an electoral shake up that could make political parties more responsive to the electorate.

On the dark side, although the 2013 elections were much smoother than

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<sup>11</sup> OSCE/ODHIR, *Republic of Albania*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Rozhani, Arben. 2013. Berisha dorëhqet, bën gati pasardhësin. *Shekulli*, 27 June, 1.

expected they did not fully test the Albanian electoral institutions. The smooth development of elections was primarily due to the electoral results. The loss of the ruling Democratic Party (DP) and the victory of the opposing coalition led by the Socialist Party (SP) and the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) were of such magnitude that it made futile any attempts at manipulation, while removing potential electoral disagreements between the two competing camps. One could speculate that a closer result, such as that of 2009, could have produced much more tension and a protracted counting process given the political imbalance of the Central Elections Commission (CEC) and its contestation as an illegal institution by the two main opposition parties. As the Coalition of Local Monitors concluded: “The electoral process of June 23 in its entirety was characterized by a lack of legality, while enjoying a legitimacy accepted by all contending parties, which is an unusual and unpromising situation for a country like Albania.”<sup>13</sup>

Another even more disturbing phenomenon exposed by the 2013 parliamentary elections was the increasing importance of clientelism in Albanian politics. This ranged from specific acts of buying the vote in exchange for money, to more general phenomena of political patronage, such as the promise for employment in the public administration in exchange for the one’s personal and family vote. Both international and local observers noted serious allegations of vote-buying that involved all the major political parties, especially with regard to vulnerable groups such as poor rural communities and the Roma and Egyptian populations.<sup>14</sup> The spectacular success of the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) marked the consolidation of political patronage. SMI enjoyed two advantages that would attract the rational voter trying to maximise immediate material benefits in exchange for the vote. First, SMI enjoyed a significant gap between electoral size and government power. In 2009 even though SMI received 5% of the vote it controlled 20% of the power.<sup>15</sup> This meant that SMI controlled 20% of state institutions where it employed its political supporters. In other words it had more to give to its supporters in exchange for the vote compared to other parties. Second, as a kingmaker SMI created a public perception that “it was going to be in power no matter which coalition won the elections.”<sup>16</sup> Put in business terms, SMI was a safe and high yield investment. As a consequence it was in the best position to develop a system of political patronage. This was an efficient mechanism in a country where politicians appeared equally corrupt, where programmatic and emotional mobilization was weak, while poverty and unemployment were high.

Therefore, as a staunch critic of the Government put it, the victory of the left-wing coalition *Alliance for a European Albania* produced a “rotation that came from the failure of [democratic] principles.”<sup>17</sup> In order to come to power the opposition Socialist Party (SP) created a coalition with what it had itself

<sup>13</sup> Koalicioni i Vëzhguesve Vendor. 2013. *Zgjedhjet për Kuvendin e Shqipërisë 23 Qershor, 2013: Raport Përfundimtar i Vëzhgimit*. Tiranë: Koalicioni i Vëzhguesve Vendor, 13.

<sup>14</sup> OSCE/ODHIR, *Republic of Albania*, 14; Koalicioni i Vëzhguesve Vendor, *Zgjedhjet për Kuvendin e Shqipërisë*, 75.

<sup>15</sup> *Koha Jonë*. 2009. *Marrëveshja e Plotë mes PD dhe LSI*, 3 September. (accessed: 10 December 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Nazarko, Mentor. 2013. *Pikëpyetje mbi leximin e zgjedhjeve*. *Panorma*, 30 June.

<sup>17</sup> Baze, *Një rotacion*.

labelled the most rotten part of Government, the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI). This in turn fed a politics of patronage in which many voters who were no longer able to penalize corruption or reward honesty in governance chose to maximise immediate benefits in exchange for their vote, which could explain the spectacular success of SMI.<sup>18</sup> This does not bode well for the future of Albanian politics. As the politics of clientelism and patronage expand, elections will serve less to penalize bad governance and to clean up government and more to replace one political clientele with another.

In short the 2013 parliamentary elections in Albania were an interplay of lights and shadows. On the bright side they could be read as a strong message against the arrogance and corruption of the ruling Democratic Party and its leader Sali Berisha. They showed that in the final analysis it is the electorate that has the last word, even if a ruling party manages to bring under control all key state institutions. On the darker side these elections strengthened the politics of patronage, recycling into power the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI) that not long ago was labelled by the current Prime Minister Edi Rama as the most rotten part of the previous government. It is still too early to tell which will eventually carry the day in Albanian politics, the light or the dark. Most probably neither; it is most likely that we shall continue to see various shades of grey.

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<sup>18</sup> Nazarko, *Pikëpyetje*.

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