



The political vacuum in Albania

FREE-MARKET capitalism is bringing pauperism and brutality, not prosperity and democracy, to Eastern Europe: that is one of the lessons of the disorder in Albania. The other lesson is that no opposition yet exists there capable of offering a coherent alternative.

The remorseless suppression of political debate by the Stalinist regimes — especially fierce in Albania — stopped ideas developing. Official propaganda discredited all the language of socialism. The weakness in the 1980s of the Western left completed the inhibitions on working-class politics.

Until very recently, Sali Berisha's government in Albania was the West's favourite post-Stalinist regime in Eastern Europe. It was praised by the IMF. It got more Western aid than any other East European regime. It was a particular favourite of Britain's Tories, who sent Malcolm Rifkind to visit Tirana last year. Berisha's Democratic Party became a member of the European Democratic Union, alongside the Tories.

The Tories and the bankers were pleased to find a government openly committed to Thatcherite ideas and speedy privatisation, uninhibited by the shapeless yet significant working-class pressure which has slowed regimes elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Having acquired control over the main forces of the old Stalinist state, and supplemented them by his own chosen thugs, Berisha could impose market policies on Albania's people as ruthlessly as the old

dictator Enver Hoxha imposed his 'Marxism-Leninism'.

National income figures showed respectable growth. Yet industry — which accounted for over 50% of total output under the old regime — had collapsed. Andrew Gumbel, in the *Independent* (14 February), describes Berisha's capitalism as "a largely gangster-based economy. Drug barons operate with impunity, and much of the transportation of heroin and other drugs across Albania, from Macedonia and Greece en route to Italy, is believed to be organised by Shik, the state security police... the chain of command in the rackets goes all the way to the top..."

"If around one million people sank hard-won foreign currency into the pyramid schemes, it was partly on a calculated assumption that the government was underwriting the operations with dirty money."

Apparently because of a hitch in the drug trade, early this year the pyramid schemes had to raise their promised interest rates to ridiculous levels to try to draw in enough new punters to see them through. They failed, they collapsed, people lost their savings and their income.

The people rebelled, demanding their money back and the resignation of the government. Large sections of the state forces, staffed by people who put their money in the pyramid schemes too, have collapsed.

Yet there are no reports of any clear-cut demands for economic and social

reconstruction. Instead of proposing such demands, the opposition parties — in the first place, the Socialist Party, the reconstructed ex-Stalinist party — have joined a new coalition government under Berisha. On 17 March, the *Financial Times* reported: "In Tirana, President Sali Berisha and his new coalition government appeared to have restored order to the streets by arming militia members and sending armoured personnel carriers around the capital. A dusk-to-dawn, shoot-on-sight curfew remained in force." The report may well be premature, but unless and until some new political force emerges in the rebellion, the odds must be that the core of the state machine will eventually, after much destruction, reassert its authority.

It seems unlikely, then, that the movement in Albania will spark similar but more coherent movements elsewhere in Eastern Europe. On its effects in the Albanian-populated province of Kosovo, which is under Serbian military rule, the Kosovo-based journalist Fehim Rexhepi writes: "Developments in Albania will postpone consideration of the question of Kosovo, and petrify the long-lasting blockade even more firmly. It seems that Kosovo Albanians have lost a powerful psychological point of support and that the Serbs, that is the regime in Belgrade, have gained at least that much."

In Albania — as in Britain, though much more dramatically — anti-Toryism is not enough.

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