ALBANIA ELECTION WATCH

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Albania will hold parliamentary elections on June 23, 2013. The National Democratic Institute is analyzing the electoral process through this series of reports, drawing on its 20 years of democratization work in Albania, and more specifically on its March 2013 assessment of the pre-election environment, which offered recommendations to enhance the credibility of the election process based on international standards.

The information contained in this report, which covers the period from June 15 to June 18, is based on direct observation of electoral activities, including monitoring of Central Election Commission (CEC) meetings, and interviews conducted with government and party officials, members of Commissions of Electoral Administration Zones (CEAZs), technical experts, and representatives of domestic and international non-governmental organizations throughout Albania.

These parliamentary elections, widely perceived as an important step for further European integration, present an opportunity for Albania to demonstrate its commitment to democratic practices and values. All electoral stakeholders -- including government and opposition parties, election administrators, as well as the voting public -- have a responsibility to ensure that the principles of fairness, peaceful comportment, transparency, and accountability are upheld.

Total Observers Accredited by the Central Election Commission*: 8,260

Citizen Observer Groups: 28

Total Citizen Observers: 7,597
- 2,402 Long-term observers (LTOs)
- 5,177 Short-term observers (STOs)
- 18 Interpreters

International Observer Groups*: 9

Total International Observers*: 663
- 136 LTOs
- 308 STOs
- 219 Interpreters

**As of June 18. Observers may be accredited up until June 20.*

ELECTION PREPARATIONS FINALIZED

The CEC continues to make final preparations for Election Day, although still operating with only four members – the chair and three members nominated by the governing coalition. As detailed in NDI's first *Election Watch* report, opposition-nominated members of the CEC resigned in April following parliament's controversial removal of the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI)-nominated member, when the SMI left the Democratic Party's (DP) governing coalition to join a pre-electoral coalition with the opposition Socialist Party (SP). Opposition parties continue to participate at CEC meetings through their appointed legal representatives, though these representatives have no voting rights.

Operating in this fashion, the CEC has addressed a number of election-related issues including the review of party requests to move or consolidate voting locations, the registration of parties for the ballot in the four mayoral elections coinciding with the parliamentary national election, accreditation of observers, and approval of counting procedures.

The CEC has continued to train election officials throughout the country, but expressed concern about low levels of attendance among polling station commissioners for training sessions that began on June 13. The CEC urged parties to encourage their representatives to attend. The CEC has also voiced concern about the rising percentage of election district CEAZ commissioners (more than 13%) who have been replaced. Parties' last-minute replacements of election officials have been common given their concerns that these individuals may be corruptible or subject to undue influence from other parties in advance of the elections.

On June 17 and 18, the CEC took decisions to discontinue the electronic counting system pilot project in Fier and the electronic verification system pilot in Tirana. The CEC approved the use of manual counting in the first case and the use of manual identification in the second – decisions that require four votes – rather than formal discontinuation of the projects, which would have required five votes. Technical issues with each system, detailed in NDI's last report, were criticized by both major parties. This process suffered from a lack of transparency, and continuously delayed decision making on each wasted time and resources which could have been better allocated to other issues. The CEC will reportedly still be required to pay 2.6 million euros to the contracted company for its work on these discontinued projects.

FINAL DAYS OF CAMPAIGNING

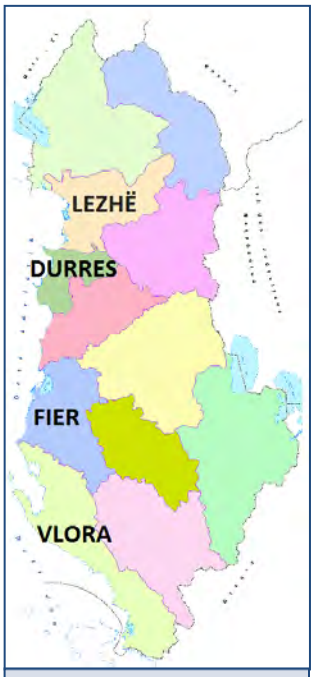
With 66 parties registered – most running in either the governing or opposition coalition – party propaganda is highly visible throughout the country. The final week of campaigning, for major and minor parties alike, is focused on intensified door-to-door outreach. Major parties, including the DP, SP, and SMI, plan various get-out-the-vote initiatives for Election Day. Speculation about electoral results remains high, with each of NDI's interlocutors expressing optimism of the result for their respective parties.

Many DP candidates are from the districts where they are running, a strategy that offers voters in each region a sense of being represented by one of their own. In contrast, the SP has chosen to run many of its candidates in districts where they have not necessarily extensively lived or worked, offering voters in each region new faces with new ideas, possibly to emulate its "Rebirth" message. Some interlocutors, with whom NDI analysts have spoken, speculate that this could cause a slight backlash from SP supporters and local members, who may have expected established members of their communities to represent them.

Additionally, the DP, SP, and SMI each appear to have placed at least one prominent businessman in an electable position on each district list. These individuals offer financing and personal networks to the campaigns for that district, while potentially shoring up support of voters and their families under their employ. For each of the major parties, candidates in non-electable positions usually have a strong electoral base in a few specific communes or municipalities, securing votes for the good of the party.

In the final week of campaigning, all the parties are engaging in door-to-door outreach and small group meetings, while the larger parties are also organizing bigger party rallies. While campaigning at the district level has been described as "the calmest ever," traditionally tight districts combined with the entrance of new parties and independent candidates as well as shifts in political affiliation by a few candidates, have made certain districts particularly compelling.

NDI has profiled four of these districts below. In each, as with most districts NDI has visited, interlocutors anticipate a relatively calm Election Day, though most voiced concerns about membership changes in lower-level electoral administration bodies in the final days before Election Day, as well as heightened political interference in the vote counting process. Additionally, NDI continues to hear allegations of vote buying from parties, media, and the public at large.



Districts in profile in this report

Durres

In the 2009 election, the DP won seven mandates in the district of Durres, the SP won five, and the SMI won one seat. This result would not have changed had the SP and SMI been in an electoral alliance. In this race, the DP is running on its proclaimed achievements from the past eight years and asserts it will maintain its seven parliamentary seats in Durres and possibly earn one more. Meanwhile, the SP is focusing its campaign on the government's lack of accountability and failed promises of economic and job growth and asserts its goal is to win seven seats. The SMI seeks to win two mandates with "proven personalities" at the top of its list – the candidate topping its Durres list, Lefter Koka, being particularly active and well-known as a former mayor, and Edmond Panariti, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs listed in the second position.

The New Democratic Spirit (NDS) and Republican Party (RP) hold out hope that they can each secure one seat each, with the top position on their lists each headed by a prominent politician. The NDS list is headed by former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Gazmend Oketa, formerly a DP member of parliament (MP). The RP list is led by Agron Duka, a well-known businessman and former SP parliamentarian. The NDS is centering its campaign on Oketa's record and is promoting a platform to ensure the independence of government institutions and to consolidate property rights issues. Meanwhile, the RP is focusing its efforts behind Duka, who has his own voter base and strong connections in the community. Allegations of vote buying, abuse of state resources, and pressuring or threatening public officials are levied by the parties against one another.

Fier

Political tensions in this district have been high since the 2009 elections which, along with 2011 local elections, were marred by allegations of electoral irregularities. Two SP local councilors shifted affiliation to the DP following the local elections amid controversial circumstances, changing the balance of power in the local council and prompting further reshuffling of the Fier regional council. Ultimately, these changes shifted the local and regional balance of power from the SP to the DP, creating a state of continued stalemate between the parties that has hampered the work of the regional council for months.

DP campaign posters proclaim government successes, such as visa free travel to the Shengen Zone.

Hence, the 2013 race for Fier's 16 mandates is considered an important battleground. The SP currently holds nine mandates and the DP six. The SMI secured one mandate in 2009, though its representative, Dritan Prifti, left the party in 2011, continuing in

parliament as an independent following a very public falling out with SMI leader Ilir Meta. During this time, Prifti released video of Meta allegedly engaging in a corruption scheme. Meta was later acquitted of official charges against him.

For these elections, the SP predicts that it will win 10 mandates, while the DP aims for at least seven, and SMI targeting two or even three mandates. Most major parties do not believe that Prifti, running again in Fier as an independent, will win a mandate, though there are concerns that he may siphon votes away from the SP-SMI coalition.

While no major fears were expressed about Election Day itself, political party representatives whom NDI analysts met continue to levy allegations against each other. The smaller parties, including SMI, denounce major parties for abusing their roles in central and municipal government to intimidate and coerce public employees to support their parties and participate in campaign events, or threaten the supporters of other parties with job loss. The larger parties, in turn, accuse the smaller parties of vote buying to garner support, particularly in poorer rural areas.

Lezhë

The district of Lezhë's seven mandates are currently divided four to three between the DP and SP. Although this balance is expected to be maintained in these elections, many interlocutors and analysts view Lezhë as a district that may reflect the electoral trend nationally.

The personalities topping the parties' candidate lists in Lezhë underline the region's complicated politics. Occupying the DP's first ballot position is the country's foreign minister, Aldo Bumçi, while the SP list is headed by Mimi Kodheli, a former deputy mayor and prefect from Tirana. Monika Kryemadhi, the wife of SMI leader Ilir Meta and a respected political leader in her own right, leads her party's ticket. The most controversial candidate may be former Socialist parliamentarian Gjovalin Kadeli, who, spurned by the SP, declared his support for the DP and was then named to the DP's number two spot. Further, competitive candidates on both DP and SP lists have been accused of having ties to organized crime.

A voter targeting map hangs on a wall of the SP's campaign headquarters in Lezhë, obscuring notes and signatures from campaign activists.

Unlike in other districts, NDI's interlocutors describe the campaign environment as tense in Lezhë, as accusations of vote buying have become more fervent and fears of election commissioners being coerced into manipulating the counting process more frequent. The two coalition's voter outreach strategies are taking contrasting approaches, with the DP focused on creating an organizational network responsive to the local communities, while the SP-led coalition's efforts appear aimed at harnessing national attitudes with policy proposals that challenge the political status quo.

Vlora

The southern district of Vlora, largely considered an SP stronghold, has 12 mandates. The SP holds six seats, while the DP has four, the Human Rights Union Party (HRUP, part of the SP coalition) has one, and the Party for Justice, Integration, and Unity (PDIU, part of the DP coalition) has one. With SP leader Edi Rama at the top of the party's list in Vlora, the campaign in the district has been raised to the national level, with the city blanketed in the party's "Rebirth" posters and flags, and SP headquarters under additional pressure to secure a stronger victory than previously. The DP aims to win five mandates for its coalition; the SP stated its goal is seven mandates; and the SMI predicts it will receive one or two mandates. The two smaller parties (HRUP and PDIU) which won mandates in the 2009 elections should impact the final results, with support for both likely to increase the vote count for the two coalitions.

Campaign posters and graffiti are present in even the most rural areas, including this, for the New Democratic Spirit, on a mountain road in the district of Vlora.

Meanwhile, independent candidate Arben Malaj, a former SP MP from Vlora who was not included on the SP list for these elections, is expected to influence the election results. His campaign is relying on his years of service to the citizens of Vlora and targeted door-to-door outreach, as well as increased communication through social media, to secure a mandate. His support will likely derive from left-wing supporters who are disillusioned with the SP-SMI electoral alliance. However, he has been discounted by the other parties and continues to face personal attacks from his former party, with Rama labeling him a "traitor" and imploring voters not to waste a vote on him. Malaj counters that voters should use their votes "in favor" and not consider it "a vote against someone."

Party supporters gather for a Red and Black Alliance campaign rally in Vlora. The Alliance has been criticized by many for being seen to promote a nationalist agenda.

WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

As noted in NDI's first *Election Watch* report, Albania's electoral code requires that women comprise 30 percent of the candidates on party lists for each of the country's 12 election districts, and that at least one woman be placed among the top three names of each list. However, this legal provision was unmet by the main political parties -- DP, SP and SMI -- on several lists. Rather than comply with the provision, these parties chose instead to accept the fines imposed on them by the CEC. A female deputy mayor from a northern district expressed her frustration with the lack of women on the major parties' lists, stating that "any man willing to pay a fine to not have women on the list is very offensive."

Women candidates and party representatives, with whom NDI has spoken, generally bemoaned parties' support for women's political participation, with a number of women characterizing the situation as "a disaster for women nationally due to a prevailing mentality that women are not qualified for the

political arena." And while women may hold 30 percent of positions in their parties' local branches, they are usually not at the top management level.

The women NDI met also describe minimal, if any, financial support from parties to conduct campaign activities. Further, they noted a dearth of media coverage of their activities, particularly from national media outlets. These obstacles have often led to women candidates to use low-budget means to get their message out, such as relying on friends to volunteer, using any available resource creatively (like using a beauty salon as headquarters for a campaign), and utilizing social media.

However, other women – including those active in the major parties' women's forums – have characterized women's participation in these elections as slightly improved over past elections. These women have discussed more visible and active campaign events that are hosted by women's forums. A woman candidate from the SMI noted that these types of events have increased the party's recognition of capable women in its structures, leading to optimism that future elections would feature even more women candidates. Both male and female candidates from major parties have also described campaign rallies and meetings that have targeted women and issues important to them. While such events are a positive sign that parties are increasingly considering how to target female voters as a key demographic, messaging still appears to be rudimentary, with vague arguments on the need for gender equality and weak commitments on promoting specific policies that would contribute to women's participation in the economic and political sphere.

CONTENTIOUS COUNTING?

In past elections, most notably in the 2009 and 2011 elections, the ballot counting process in Albania has been contentious and controversial. It is widely believed that the counting process will be the most problematic process again during these elections. Problems that have plagued previous counting processes include:

- Pressure on election administration officials from political party representatives;
- Ballot Counting Center (BCC) team members taking unscheduled breaks; and,
- Parties ordering their members of the ballot counting teams to leave BCCs in order to slow or stop the counting process.

Smaller parties, which do not have representation on ballot counting teams, claim that votes for their parties are not counted or miscounted during this process.

Since the 2011 elections, some improvements have been made to the counting process. These include:

- The number of BCCs was increased from 66 to 89, which may speed up the counting process as each BCC will have fewer ballot boxes to count; and,
- An integrated election tracking system is in place that will allow preliminary election results to be transmitted quickly to the CEC and displayed on their website. The system also includes safeguards that help prevent errors when election officials enter results into the system. If implemented correctly, this system may improve the transparency and accuracy of election results.

The counting process has also been criticized by international and domestic observer groups for its lack of transparency since non-partisan observers are often not allowed to get close enough to all the ballot counting tables to observe all of the counting procedures. To better improve transparency of the process, domestic and international have recommended that observers be allowed to observe from within a few feet of all ballot counting tables in each of the 89 BCCs, so that they can accurately report on the entirety of the process.

NONPARTISAN CITIZEN ELECTION OBSERVATION AND OTHER MONITORING EFFORTS

Numerous civic organizations are actively monitoring electoral preparations, campaigns, and party financing.

At a press conference in Tirana, the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections presents its observation methodology for Election Day.

The Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (CFFE) is an independent, non-partisan coalition – led by the Albanian Helsinki Committee, the Gender Alliance Center for Development, and the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation – which will observe the 2013 elections, placing special emphasis on electoral issues that impact human rights and people with disabilities and women.

The Coalition of Domestic Observers (CDO) also has been monitoring electoral preparations and plans a national observation mission for Election Day. CDO is led by the Society for Democratic Culture, KRIIK Albania, and the Association for Women and Children and has monitored past election cycles.

Civic groups are increasingly using information technology tools to enhance citizens' participation in the 2013 elections. For example, Mjaft! launched a vote-meter project to educate citizens about parties' positions and a truth-o-meter project that monitors the veracity of parties' and leaders' statements and campaign promises. The group is also monitoring and reporting on party financing, with a press conference to release another report anticipated on June 22. Meanwhile, the Albanian Science Institute has launched an online platform called Za'Lart ("Raised Voice") to collect citizens' reports on electoral incidents, via uploaded photos, videos, and messages. The organization relies on a network of 15 journalists and 100 trained volunteers, who report on and verify citizens' observations in each of Albania's 12 districts.

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization (NGO) that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. With funding provided by the United States Agency for International Development and the National Endowment for Democracy, NDI has supported Albania's transition to democracy since 1991, helping to increase the public's participation in decision-making at the local and national levels, organizing and supporting election monitoring and voter education, and fostering the development of political parties and emerging political leaders. NDI works with Albania's major political parties, as well as with domestic nongovernmental organizations and citizens groups, government institutions, and international organizations.

For more information, please contact: Ana Kadovic, NDI/Albania Resident Director
akovacevic@ndi.org | Tel/fax: +355 42 271 281| Cell: +355 69 20 30 212

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