



NEWS RELEASE

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STATEMENT BY THE INTERNATIONAL PRE-ELECTION FACT-FINDING DELEGATION TO ALBANIA

Tirane, Albania
March 6, 1992

An international delegation of election experts, organized by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), visited Albania from March 2-6, 1992 to assess the electoral system being put in place for the elections on March 22 and 29.

The team met with leaders of the Democratic Party, Socialist Party, Social Democratic Party, Republican Party, Agrarian Party, the Union for Human Rights and the Communist Party. They also met with government officials, including the ministers of Defense and Public Order, the Central Election Commission, the Elections Secretariat and the Director General of the state broadcast corporation. The delegation also travelled to Fier and Lushnja to meet with local party branches, municipal officials, local election commissions and the local military commanders. Finally, the delegation met with leaders and organizers of the Society for Free Elections and Democratic Culture, a nonpartisan civic education organization.

The delegation consisted of the following persons:

Gabriel Diaz Berbel, MP, Popular Party, Spain;

Juraj Mihalik, 1990 Campaign Manager, Public Against Violence, Czech and Slovak Federated Republic;

Alina Tabaroiu, Program Director, Pro-Democracy Association, Romania;

Thomas O. Melia, Program Director, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs.

The delegation offers the following comments and observations:

1. It is possible -- but not assured -- that free and meaningful elections could take place in Albania this month. A generally sound election law has been enacted and the necessary mechanisms are being put in place. The principle problem is the shortage of time available before Election Day, compounded by the familiar Albanian difficulties with transportation and communication.

2. The decentralized election system disperses to the 100 Zone Election Commissions a great deal of authority, although they do not always have the technical means to exercise this responsibility in the professional way the commissions desire. They have, for instance, the authority to decide whether candidates qualify for the ballot and the location of voting sites. But they do not generally have the transportation necessary to visit possible voting sites. In Lushnja and Fier we met with Rrethe (district) officials and zone election commissions. In Tirane, we also briefly observed a national coordinating meeting for Rrethe officials on March 4. We were quite favorably impressed by the intelligence and commitment to democracy of the Rrethe officials and the Zone Election commissioners. They have clearly expressed a desire for clearer guidance from the Central Election Commission to ensure the uniform application of the law throughout the nation. Yet most of the Zone Election Commissions, even in urban areas, apparently do not have any means of communicating directly with the Central Election Commission -- meaning that they must rely on guidance from Rrethe officials rather than the Central Election Commission.

3. One important matter has arisen in the extended discussion about the production of the ballots themselves. During the visit of the first pre-election, there was a clear consensus among all the major political forces to invite foreign agencies to assist in the preparation of the materials needed for the election. The UNDP, for instance, is providing much-needed office equipment and vehicles to the election administration. In addition, a specific offer to print the ballots in Austria, with the support of the International Foundation for Electoral Assistance, was accepted. More recently, after these ballots were printed in Austria, a decision was taken to print to print the ballots in Albania. It is the view of the delegation that either possibility is technically acceptable; and that the decision should be made on the basis of what is more timely and less costly to Albania. We emphasize to those who prefer the "Austrian ballots" that there are sufficient safeguards in the election system to ensure against multiple voting (party and non-party observers at voting sites, the marking of the national identification document with a seal and signature at the time of voting, the counting of the ballots at the voting sites). It is vital, in any democratic election, for the contending parties to assume the largest part of the responsibility for the integrity of the system, and this will be true in Albania.

The issue here is the authority of the Central Election Commission. We have been told that a majority of the CEC has made clear its preference for using the ballots printed in Austria. Yet the Government has chosen not to abide by the preference of the majority of the Commission, even though the ballots would be delivered free-of-charge and are already printed. We hope that the authority of the CEC will be respected by all interested parties.

4. Several Albanian institutions have exercised commendable initiative in educating the public about the election process to date and they should be acknowledged for the important role they are playing in developing a democratic

culture in Albania. Included are: the defense ministry's publication Luftetari and the publication of the ministry of public order, Albapol. Both have published extracts of the election law and articles explaining the process to their enlisted personnel and officers.

5. The state broadcasting company has begun broadcasting interviews with members of the Central Election Commission explaining various aspects of the election process, and has developed a plan for broadcasting 30- to 60-minute presentations by the various political parties during the next three weeks. Unfortunately, the parties have not yet agreed to joint participation in debates or roundtable discussions, so this potentially valuable opportunity for the public to examine the candidates will apparently not be available. Since the visit of the first NDI pre-election survey four weeks ago, newsprint has become available, thanks in part to assistance provided by foreign governments, and newspapers have begun printing again. Distribution outside the major cities remains problematic, however, thus enhancing the importance of the broadcast media. The National Democratic Institute has this week confirmed, in its meetings with the Chairman of the Central Election Commission and the director-general of the broadcast corporation, arrangements for the production of an educational film explaining the election process that will be shown on Albanian television beginning next week.

6. Articles 89 and 90 of the election law provide for the participation of nonpartisan domestic election monitors, which is a positive and healthy thing for the development of a civic democratic culture. The Society for Free Elections and Democratic Culture has been formed in Albania and is developing a network of trained volunteers who plan to be present in voting places on March 22 and March 29. We urge the Central Election Commission to ensure that appropriate credentials are available to the members of the Society in a timely fashion.

7. In conclusion, we wish to emphasize the many positive developments we have seen in our brief visit. Albania is clearly on the road to developing a democratic political culture, thanks to the intelligence and goodwill of the people of this fine country. International visitors like ourselves can be helpful, but the important decisions and the work necessary to rebuild this country must be done by Albanians. We are confident that they can do so.

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