

ALBANIA ELECTION WATCH

Volume 2, June 4, 2013

ELECTION DEADLINES

June 3: Commissions of Electoral Administration Zones (CEAZs) appoint members of Voting Center Commissions (VCCs)

June 10: Last day for domestic observers to submit requests for accreditation to the Central Election Commission (CEC)

June 13: CEAZs establish Ballot Counting Teams

June 20: Last day for international observers to submit requests for accreditation to CEC

June 22: End of electoral campaign; Start of 'Electoral Silence'

June 23: Election Day

ELECTIONS BY THE NUMBERS

12 Electoral Districts

140 Parliamentary Seats

7,149 Candidates

3,270,936 Voters

5,506 Polling Stations



Albania will hold parliamentary elections on June 23, 2013. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is analyzing the electoral process through this series of reports, building on its [20 years of democratization support in Albania](#), and 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 May 22 to June 3, is based on direct observation of electoral activities and approximately 65 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 in all 12 election districts of Albania.

INTRODUCTION

The official campaign period started on May 24. The campaign appears to be focusing more on substantive policy issues than in past election cycles. Economic issues -- primarily job creation -- are central, reflecting what citizens told NDI in its focus group research in October 2012. However, at the national level, vitriolic verbal attacks and inflammatory rhetoric by party leaders risk turning a relatively calm election campaign into a tense one, especially if such language pervades the grassroots.

Subsidiary election bodies have expressed concern that undue interference by parties in their work will undermine their efforts to administer the election in a professional, non-partisan manner. At the national level, the Central Election Commission (CEC) continues to operate with only four members (as detailed in [NDI's first Election Watch](#)), but so far, this has not delayed the CEC from continuing with necessary preparations for the election.

The elections are being closely fought between the governing coalition led by the incumbent Democratic Party (DP) chaired by Prime Minister Sali Berisha, and an opposition coalition led by the Socialist Party, headed by former Tirana Mayor Edi Rama, and the Socialist Movement for Integration (SMI), headed by former Prime Minister and erstwhile ally of Berisha, Ilir Meta. A grouping of new party entrants may affect the political outcome.

Albania aspires to join the European Union (EU), which has stated that the country's candidacy may proceed if the upcoming elections meet international democratic standards. Albania has yet to hold elections that fully meet international election standards. These polls present Albania with the opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to democratic elections. All electoral actors -- including government and opposition parties, election administrators, civic organizations, and the voting public -- have a responsibility to ensure that the principles of fairness, peaceful comportment, transparency, and accountability are upheld.

THE CAMPAIGN

While the official campaign period started on May 24, campaigning was observed around the country months before the official start date. Parties, however, intensified their campaigning activities by organizing town hall meetings, bus tours, and kick-off rallies to introduce party candidates to voters two weeks before the official campaign period. Campaigning prior to the official campaign period is a violation of the electoral code and should be subject to administrative sanctions by the CEC. The Coalition of Domestic Observers (CDO), a domestic citizen observer group, has urged the CEC to take action against parties which started campaigning prior to the official start of the campaign period; however, no fines have been levied to-date.



Campaign Flags for DP, SP and SMI on a Main Road in Elbasan

In the first two weeks of the official campaign period, political party leaders, candidates and campaign teams have intensified their outreach activities, working to build support by holding public rallies, distributing and displaying campaign billboards and leaflets, decorating vehicles with party colors and meeting with citizens at the municipal and communal level. Parties have begun paid media advertising, and some have started grassroots door-to-door activities.

From NDI's interactions and general observations, the campaign environment at the local level appears mostly calm, although most interlocutors anticipate that campaigning will become more heated and tense as Election Day approaches. Branch representatives of major political parties claim to be committed to avoiding personal attacks and expressed desires to run issue-based campaigns. These sentiments are contrasted by the actions of political leaders, who continue to engage in strong personal accusations at campaign rallies, which are widely reported by mainstream media. This behavior runs contrary to NDI's recommendation in its pre-election assessment that political parties refrain from speech and other behavior that denigrates opponents and lowers public confidence in the political process. Negative rhetoric at the national level has raised concerns among some local party officials that it could permeate the as-yet peaceful campaign environment at the local level.

The media has reported several incidents of violence against candidates and local party officials in various municipalities, including an explosion at the apartment building where a DP candidate resides in Vlora, an attempted shooting of the chair of the DP branch in Shtiqen commune (Kukës district), and an explosion outside the home and business premises of the SP chair of Prezë commune (Tirana district). While these attacks, strongly condemned by the major party leaders, have yet to be confirmed as politically motivated, they do represent a potentially troubling increase in violent campaign incidents.

ECONOMY TOP PRIORITY IN NDI FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

NDI conducted a series of focus groups in October 2012. [The main findings](#), also supported by recent polling by local organizations, include the following:

- Citizens state that economic issues are their top concern, including high unemployment, low living standards due to rising prices, and insufficient salaries;
- Widespread corruption, inefficiency and a lack of quality services in healthcare and education are consistently cited as reasons for citizens' poor quality of life;
- Because of the perceived surge in crime, personal safety has become one of the greatest concerns;
- Corruption and the lack of rule of law are frequently mentioned by participants as major challenges facing the country;
- Participants expressed a deep sense of mistrust towards the country's politicians – in ruling and opposition parties alike – who seem to aspire to power and public offices only as a means of personal gain and benefit;
- While participants agree that politics has a major impact on their everyday life, they feel largely disconnected from their elected representatives outside of election cycles.

In comparison to past elections, campaigns appear to be focusing more on substantive issues, which should allow voters to draw clearer policy distinctions between the parties. The DP, running under the slogan "We are the Change, Forward," argues that its continued leadership is needed to complete the changes it initiated when it came to power eight years ago. The party claims among its successes job creation and improved infrastructure and public utilities, as well as responsibility for securing Albania's membership in NATO and taking determined steps toward membership in the EU. The DP promises to continue reforms that support job creation, promote new business, and encourage developments in industry, agriculture, energy, tourism and information and communication technologies.

The SP chose "Renaissance" as its slogan, positioning itself as the alternative to a government that it claims has mired the country in economic stagnation and corruption. The party has offered a program for economic recovery based on creating jobs and providing vocational training for citizens seeking employment, reducing living costs for 95 percent of the population by removing the flat tax burden, and increasing public funding for rural development.

The central policy difference between the two major parties turns on tax policy. The DP considers the existing 10 percent flat tax rate as a boon for the economic environment, and highlights targeted tax breaks for agriculture and small business. The Socialists promote a progressive tax system that would lower taxes for low- and middle-income employees at the expense of higher income earners, as well as eliminate taxes on basic produce and medication.

The third largest party, the SMI, has the slogan "Let's Move Faster," alluding to Albania's need to move more quickly on its path to EU integration, and it boasts its success in uniting the governing and opposition parties' support to pass three so-called "EU reform laws" -- regulating the Supreme Court, parliamentary rules of procedure, and the status of civil servants -- that will enable the country to receive EU candidate status in 2013, in conjunction with the need to hold democratic elections. As with the DP and SP, SMI also stresses its plans for job creation and the need for economic reform. In this election, there are two main new political parties campaigning actively and running independently from the two major coalitions -- the New Democratic Spirit (NDS) and the Red and Black Alliance (RBA). Both of these parties are running on anti-establishment messages against both left and right forces, and are mainly focused on strengthening the state institutions and fighting pervasive corruption.

VOTER COERCION & VOTE BUYING

While NDI's pre-election assessment recommended that political party leaders and government officials refrain from practices that coerce voter support, NDI's election analysts have repeatedly heard -- and CDO and the media continue to report -- allegations of widespread, illegal campaign practices. Several party representatives admitted to NDI that their parties would be engaging in vote buying. The criminal code was amended to include stronger penalties for anyone engaging in voter coercion and vote buying. These activities are now punishable by fines or imprisonment of up to six months.

ABUSE OF STATE RESOURCES

Despite Prime Minister Sali Berisha's May 9 public appeal that state resources not be used for campaign purposes, DP campaign [speeches](#) and [photos](#) appear on official government websites. Both the DP and SP have also been accused by each other and smaller parties of abusing government resources in the municipalities where they have the majority.

Although no official complaints have been filed as of June 3, specific allegations of the illegal use of public resources to campaign have been shared with NDI analysts and reported by domestic observer groups and the media. Teachers and other public sector employees have allegedly been threatened with the loss of their jobs if they voice opposition to the governing coalition, and some were reportedly required to sign-in at rallies to demonstrate their attendance. In Shkodra and Peshkopi, NDI was told by separate sources that teachers and students had been bussed to DP campaign events. Such abuse of state resources is clearly prohibited by the electoral code.

As a result of the many cases of public resource abuse reported in the media, the People's Advocate (ombudsman) issued a public statement urging citizens and public administration employees to file complaints with his office if they are subject to pressure to attend campaign events. NDI reiterates the recommendation from its pre-election assessment that relevant authorities should investigate and prosecute formal complaints of campaign misuse of public resources.

ELECTION ADMINISTRATION – THE CEC & THE CEAZs

On the weekend of May 17, the CEC conducted two-day trainings throughout the country for commissioners of the Electoral Administration Zones. According to information provided to NDI by the CEC, approximately 10 percent of the total number of CEAZ commissioners have, to date, been replaced by their respective political parties. While there is nothing in the code that prohibits political parties from changing their members on the CEAZs, which were constituted on March 25, frequent replacement for political reasons creates undue administrative and financial burden on the CEC and leaves new

PROFILE OF A STOLEN VOTE

The most frequent examples of alleged illegal practices that have been described to NDI analysts include:

- Coercion of public sector employees to sign a pledge to vote for a certain party under threat of job loss, demotion or other material penalty;
- Financial or material payment to vote for a certain party in exchange for signing a pledge to do so, providing photographic evidence, or surreptitiously displaying a cast ballot to party-appointed poll workers of the marked ballot;
- Particularly in rural areas with large religious populations, payment to vote for a certain party followed by swearing on a religious text;
- Payment to not vote for a certain party, in order to reduce turnout for an opposing party, in exchange for relinquishing one's identification card, which is required to vote on Election Day; and
- "Carousel voting", in which a voter is provided with a pre-marked ballot to cast prior to entering the polling station. The blank ballot, which the voter receives in the center, is then surrendered as proof that the pre-marked ballot was cast. The process is then repeated.

members unfamiliar with rules and procedures. The CEC chairperson has repeatedly and publicly asked that political parties refrain from arbitrarily replacing CEAZ representatives. Replacements should be allowed only for specific reasons clearly stated in the code.

CEAZ chairs have reported to NDI's election analysts that they have begun their work to prepare for the voting and counting period. CEAZ members in Kukës and Elbasan districts, among others, expressed concern that political parties might interfere by pressuring election administrators, particularly at voting centers and ballot counting centers, as has been the case in past Albanian elections. Several CEAZ members from both major parties characterized the CEC -- still operating with only four members of which three were nominated by the governing majority -- as partisan, and they are concerned that such partisanship at the central level could undermine their own efforts to administer a credible and trusted election process. NDI's pre-election assessment recommended that political parties should uphold the independence of election administration bodies and refrain from interfering in the process, as professional and non-partisan administration of the elections is essential to build confidence in the outcome of an election.

Since NDI's last election report on May 22, the CEC has, among other decisions, approved candidate lists, agreed to the ordering of parties on the ballot, established a media monitoring board, finalized the list of voting centers, and determined locations for ballot counting centers. Although the electoral code suggests that some CEC decisions -- such as the rules for drawing lots to determine ballot placement (Article 98, Section 5) -- are normative acts that require five votes, the four-member CEC continues to make the decisions necessary to complete the preparations for the elections. While the SP's legal representative has challenged the CEC's ability to take certain decisions with only four members, no official complaint has been filed. Without a fully-constituted CEC operating on Election Day, the election process is left open to legal challenge.

As mentioned in the last *Election Watch*, the higher-than-expected number of parties and candidates registered on the ballot in Fier created technical problems for the electronic counting system to be piloted in this highly competitive and vote-rich district. The CEC has yet to decide whether to proceed with this project, but should do so quickly in order to remove any uncertainty regarding how ballots will be tabulated in this district.

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



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

This report is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents of this report are the sole responsibility of NDI and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.