



Albania's Elections and the Challenge of Democratic Transition
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Mr. Chairman, distinguished Representatives, ladies and gentlemen – it's a pleasure to speak to you about Albania's local elections.

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) has supported Albania's democratic transition since 1991 through political party development, citizen participation in community advocacy projects and nonpartisan election monitoring. With funding from the National Endowment for Democracy, NDI is presently promoting women's political participation, following on the many years of NDI support to hundreds of political figures, civic activists, and government officials--in Tirana and throughout Albania--as they build a participatory, transparent, and accountable political system.

NDI's perspective on this election cycle is shaped by our longstanding presence in Albania and the relationships that we enjoy across its political spectrum, our engagement in recent months and weeks with a variety of political and civic leaders in Tirana and around the country, and by our institutional experience in supporting democratic elections worldwide.

These elections, and Albania's democratic transition overall, must be considered in the context of comprehensive political, social, and economic change as the country transforms itself, in the span of roughly one generation, from communist isolation to an open democracy and market economy. Ultimately, it is to the citizens of Albania to determine if this election process merits their confidence as a democratic exercise in the broader context of their country's transition.

Albania entered this election cycle in a highly polarized environment, stemming from controversy in the 2009 parliamentary elections, grounded in deep-seated and highly personalized conflict between Albania's political parties, and punctuated by political violence this past January that tragically led to several deaths and many injuries. This particular event unambiguously called upon political leaders to step back from their partisan brinksmanship to prevent an escalation of conflict in advance of the local elections.

By and large those calls were heeded, and Albania proceeded to the May 8 local elections in a relatively calm environment. While attempts at multipartisan election reform coming out of the 2009 cycle failed, a concerted, if not always consensus-based effort to make electoral procedures more transparent was launched, with the vocal encouragement of representatives of the international community. NDI reports in the pre-election period noted shortcomings in election administration and campaign conduct, including sporadic, localized episodes of violence—shortcomings consistent with deficiencies observed in neighboring countries. Election day itself

came and went and particular advancements were evident, in the increased profile of nonpartisan citizen observers, public dialogue around concrete policy reform issues, the use of social media to expand voter outreach, and the growing, if uneven presence of women standing for local office, including an unexpected victory by a female candidate for mayor of the city of Burrell.

On the whole, the peaceful conduct of the elections was testament to Albania's desire to move away from the recent, volatile past and closer to its destined *rendez-vous* with the rest of Europe and the broader transatlantic community as a fully democratic country.

Indeed, were it not for the contentious situation over the outcome of the key race for mayor of Tirana--in which either main candidate has led by an extremely thin margin of double-digit votes amidst decisions by electoral authorities that raise questions of legal and procedural and possibly political natures--this gathering would emphasize these elections as an unfettered opportunity to reinvigorate democratic reform through political moderation and cross-party dialogue.

The opportunity to set the country back on a democratic path is indeed there, and the need to seize it is imperative. But to get to it, Albania's governing bodies and its political establishment need to resolve the outcome of the Tirana mayoral race in a way that engenders public confidence in their shared readiness to work together to advance the country's interests. This is arguably more important for Albania than who comes to occupy the mayor's office in Tirana. After all, the overall election results--and the Tirana mayor's race to an exquisite degree--show the electorate to support both major political options on basically equal footing. Both sides received a mandate in these elections; neither should therefore resort to one-sided triumphalism or prolonged protest.

Much has been said of the procedural, legal, and political factors that have brought about the extraordinary, though not unprecedented situation in Tirana. As Albania's Electoral College deliberates on these complexities, it would be inappropriate to review here the basis of the appeals before it.

It is fitting, however, and perhaps timely, to note prior instances in which election results were too close to produce a clear victor and/or the outcome was highly contested, such as the U.S. presidential race of 2000, Germany's federal elections in 2005, and Mexico's presidential elections in 2006. Each of these instances is singular and strict comparisons among them are ill-advised. Still, on a general level, they offer a basic principle: the degree to which government officials charged with applying the law to determine an outcome amidst a disputed process acquit their legal powers neutrally and transparently, and the degree to which political leaders show maturity and restraint in their comportment, ultimately determine how a country moves on from an election that in many respects is democratic, but which, by dint of voter intent and, at least in the U.S. case, procedural imprecision, produces a contestable outcome whose ultimate arbitration many find hard to accept.

In light of the above, and with a view to seizing the opportunity to restore democratic reform and progress in the wake of these elections, Albania's main political parties have the obligation to end the political stalemate that they have locked the country into for the last couple of years. Failure to do so will hold Albania back from European integration and retard its democracy.

Ending the political stalemate following the local elections encompasses many actions. The following are essential but not exhaustive.

- A multipartisan commitment to commence election reform in parliament to close procedural gaps and to continue the process of improving election standards prior to the 2012 parliamentary elections is imperative. This process must be made public and include voices outside of the main parties to ensure that reforms agreed incorporate the interests of a broad cross-section of Albanian society;
- Parties should take every step to ensure the public that they are not unduly influencing legal or procedural actions of bodies overseeing elections, from local polling commissions to the Central Election Commission. Parties should leave the representatives whom they have appointed to do what's right by those bodies and the Albanian public. Political opportunism has no place in a democratic election, particularly in an environment in which extraordinary steps are needed to demonstrate and reinforce impartiality.
- The mayor of Tirana, once invested in city hall, should take demonstrative steps to govern inclusively as a reflection that both major political options are part of the city's governing structure; and, at a very fundamental level,
- Sustained and substantive inter-party dialogue in parliament and city council must replace partisan invective and recrimination in the media and on the street. To do so, new voices need to participate, both from within the parties to showcase diverse viewpoints--even those that diverge from the positions of party leaders--and from outside of the parties, in and among the thousands of Albanians who, as individual citizens or in organized civic groups, want to have a say in how the country overall and their particular communities are governed. Albania's political system, to be democratic, cannot be the reserve of a few but must be the domain of all.

It is to Albania's governing bodies, with the help of international groups as might be sought, to resolve the issue of the election of the mayor of Tirana, and to do so in a manner that is transparent, impartial, and as resolute as the law under which they are working allows. It is to Albania's political parties and elected representatives to remedy the shortcomings observed in this election cycle, and to do so in a way that meaningfully incorporates other voices in the process. Correspondingly, the Albanian public cannot defer to the political establishment by giving in to the apathy and resentment that so many have expressed to my NDI colleagues in Albania. Instead, citizens need to be organized, so as to monitor, advocate, and otherwise insert themselves into public affairs, for it is they, not the political leadership, who are the ultimate guarantors of Albania's democracy.

No election, no matter how democratic, is perfect. At the same time, no election, given its imperfections, can be considered democratic if citizens do not have confidence in the process. Sometimes, public confidence is tested by close and disputed outcomes, as is the case in Tirana. Indeed, presumably not everyone will be assuaged by the process that ultimately produces Tirana's next mayor. That's why Albania's political leaders have the obligation to demonstrate

political moderation, dialogue, inclusion, and diversity, so that, no matter the outcome of the race, Albania can move forward, as it must.