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Albania

The new face of Eastern Europe

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The Albanian insurrection is on the defensive. Although no-one can rule out the possibility of a new cycle of confrontation between the population and the multinational "peace-keeping" force. There is also a constant risk of aggressive manoeuvres by discredited President Sali Berisha.

Since 10 March, the insurrection has been waiting. Unfortunately, this is probably not a "war of position," following the "war of movement" of early March, but a significant decline in the movement. This is partly due to fatigue, and the inability of the movement to propose a credible plan for continuing the confrontation with President Berisha. Another factor is the absence of structures and organisations which can unite the insurgents, and boost their morale again.

Thousands of people refuse to surrender their weapons until Berisha goes. But while a few lose their temper, or revolt against some decision or other of the interim government under Bashko Fino, the general climate is not one of deepening social polarisation, or a sharpening political confrontation. On the contrary, most people are saying that "we need to overcome our differences."

There are people, including among the insurgents, who say that the restoration of order is the top priority, or at least a major concern. Meanwhile, the demand that President Berisha depart is slowly fading away from the front of the insurgents' minds, and increasingly seen as a "parliamentary" question.

Significantly, no-one has dared denounce the repressive nature of the "Multinational Force." On 7 April, the Popular Committees demanded that the Force's commanders did not meet with President Berisha. But they were careful not to make any comment about the deployment of the foreign troops in Albania. In fact, many rebel leaders had indicated their support for "international protection of humanitarian aid" as early as mid-March. Which is curious when everyone knows that humanitarian aid is threatened by corrupt officials much more than the insurgents, or even armed bandits.

Democratic, but confused

In the Albanian context, the Popular Committees are extremely democratic bodies which organise and administer the insurgent zones. They are not really a form of direct democracy, since delegates are neither directly elected, nor replaceable. They do not really reflect the politicisation of the population, and the resulting decline in the hierarchical structure of society. Nevertheless, they clearly represent the "average view," and the feelings of the majority of the insurgent population.

They are certainly not part of a project to reconstitute the state apparatus in the insurgent towns. But they are contradictory collectives, which on the one hand maintain the instability, and express the demands of the insurgents, and on the other hand legitimise, through collaboration, the political parties of the Government of National Reconciliation, and the Tirana-recognised prefects and regional authorities, in the aim of restoring order. Most Committees are attempting to rebuild the police force, rather than develop popular militias or local social self-defence committees.

Committee members are mainly people with military or administrative experience, who had some kind of social prestige, and who played an important role when the insurrection began. Most were not previously "activists," nor are

they the natural leaders which all insurrections generate. Most are older men, from more conservative sectors of the population. They are less "enlightened" and less disinterested" than most of the insurgents they represent.

The military men in the committees play a very contradictory role. Everybody recognises their essential role in helping the insurgents confront and defeat the repressive forces of the Berisha regime. But these men are hardly likely to encourage the development of self-defence structures within the insurrection. Their tradition and their mentality tend to block this.

The nature and work of the committees is also influenced by the lack of "activist" experience, of any subversive or counter-culture, and, of course, the absence of networks of deliberate revolutionaries.

The other big problem is fatigue. Thousands of people who participated in the insurrection have left, or are trying to leave the country. As a group, the insurrectionaries are confused, ideologically speaking. And this confusion fixes the limits and the contradictions of the Albanian insurrection. This is a mass armed insurrection. But once the Tirana elite formed its "Government of National Reconciliation," the insurrectionaries found themselves without a political project for extending their confrontation with President Berisha, and for extending their own power base. As a result, the insurrection seems to be unable to impose its own solutions, or to make a dramatic change in the social and political balance of forces. And yet, the rebels represent an important dynamic in society. If Berisha tries any rapid move to regain control, the insurrection could re-ignite. And, once Berisha goes, parts of the rebel movement may mutate into a new social opposition.

What kind of violence?

The European media stress the violence of Albania today. Most of the time these media fail to separate the violence of the insurrection (execution of secret police agents), the political violence of the regime (its retaliations, and its "anonymous" terrorism designed to divide and weaken the insurrection), and, of course, the common violence which accompanies every insurrection, revolution or riot. From the capitalist mass-media, and from Berisha's Public Relations team, the message is the same; "Albania is suffering from a vicious circle of chaos and anarchy, which began with the insurrection."

Let's be clear. Every insurrection is accompanied by an increase of political and social violence. There is always, inevitably, an increase in transgressions of the previous legal code. Wherever a power structure is collapsing, a number of individuals attempt to appropriate the roles and the property which they consider to be theirs by right.

These individuals may be partially motivated by a spirit of solidarity, but their behaviour is also the result of years of material privation and manipulation of their personality. Inevitably, part of what they appropriate would be more useful if it was made available to other individuals or groups. But not necessarily the legal owners of said property under the previous regime.

Until an insurrection of the oppressed can transform its natural "just cause" into a new legal framework, based on liberty, equality and solidarity, there is bound to be a generalisation of low-level transgressions of the previously-existing legal code. In all previous revolutions and insurrections, this has eventually been used as a pretext for the re-imposition of authoritarian, hierarchical regulatory systems.

Generalised transgression is certainly a major problem for the Albanian insurrection. Among other things, it disorients large sectors of the movement, and makes many people more conservative. It provides arguments for those

nostalgic about "order" and a strong state.

This generalised transgression is not provoked by the insurrection. Rather, insurrection allows it to appear. The true cause of the transgression is the same set of social conditions as led to the insurrection: the material privation and feeling of being abandoned by those in power which affect most Albanians.

"Criminal" behaviour in the rebel areas obviously incorporates the traditions of transgression within Albanian society. A large part of the population, particularly in the rebel-held south, already had a very marginal relationship to legality. The Berisha regime tolerated, even encouraged this behaviour, since there were few other viable strategies for survival for many people. People were also strongly influenced by the incredible corruption of the Berisha regime, down to the lowest officials. This itself rendered the "rule of law" and respect for the law inoperable in the areas now under rebel control. In such a context, we can hardly be surprised that the south of the country suffered so much "criminal" behaviour since the insurrection began.

What to do about it?

The Popular Committees have not been able to control even the most anti-social and reprehensible elements of this generalised transgression. Where they have tried to do so, they have usually failed. And, in trying to prevent such behaviour, they have used "old-style" methods. Because they do not fully trust the Berisha regime's police force, they appoint former policemen from the previous, Stalinist regime to "keep an eye on them." As in the old days, public meetings have been organised, to exhort the population to trust and support the police.

What has not been done is to develop the self-managed structures of the insurrection, creating and generalising a system of local self-defence units, and popular tribunals. We still do not know to what extent such structures functioned in the early part of the rebellion. But since 15 March, most insurgents have been virtually passive in the face of growing transgression. The rebels don't know what to do about it, any more than they know what to do about the initiatives of the imperialist powers, and the risk of a counter-attack by the surviving nucleus of the Berisha regime.

Berisha's terrorism

To re-establish his role at the centre of the country's political life, the President seems to be operating a "strategy of tension." For this, and other obvious reasons, it is important to make a distinction between socially-motivated and small-scale transgression, and the criminal behaviour of Mafia groups and the criminal-terrorist action of Berisha's agents. It is obviously impossible to draw a precise distinction between social transgression and organised crime. But, unless the insurgents can do something about it, the omnipresent, small scale transgression will become structured and organised and, one way or another, exploited by the regime to weaken the insurrection.

It is also important to expose the "white terror" which Berisha's general staff is co-ordinating in the rebel areas, and even in Tirana. This terror is a key tool in Berisha's diplomatic negotiations. He is presenting himself to the foreign powers as the only man who can re-establish order in the "chaos" which, he claims, dominates Albania.

Inside Albania, Berisha uses violence in two directions: to discredit and weaken the insurrection, and to maintain his confrontation with the Socialist (ex-Communist) Party of Bashko Fino. The Socialists, who represent the only real parliamentary alternative to Berisha, dominate the Government of National Reconciliation. Berisha hopes that his

"strategy of tension" will push the Socialist Party towards more conservative positions, and boost the morale of his own, dissipated supporters.

There is a growing trend of assassination of Berisha's political opponents. There are clear acts of sabotage, like the burning of Socialist Party offices. And there are "blind" terrorist attacks, the aim of which is to weaken the insurrection, and increase demands for, or at least tolerance of, a return to a "strong state." The next step in this strategy will probably be the delaying of the elections planned for June, and resistance from Berisha to the creation of the promised Constituent Assembly.

Albania's enemies

Despite their differences, the foreign powers all agree on a short term strategy in Albania. The insurrection must be by-passed, and "stability" re-imposed. The "western democracies" want to liquidate the insurrection which threatens to provoke the total dissolution of a state bordering on the European Union.

None of these powers is really interested in Albanian human suffering. After all, the number of deaths during this insurrection is insignificant compared to the mountains of bodies in Rwanda, in Bosnia and in Chechnya.

The Albanian insurrection is a threat to the stability of the Balkans, but not in the way western media usually imply. No serious analysts expect this rebellion to provoke ethnic wars between Albanian minority and Slav majority in Yugoslavia and Macedonia. But the phenomenon of popular insurrection following financial collapse certainly could be repeated in those countries, in Bulgaria, or in some parts of the former USSR.

In other words, this isn't about the Albanians, about peace, or about democracy. This is about the challenge, by some Albanians, to the cohesion and credibility of the "new world order." This is why 79,000 tonnes of military hardware have been sent to Albania, to protect a few dozen tonnes of rice and milk powder.

Albania's friends

The Albanian insurrection is not an echo of the past. It is not the last vestige of some heroic past. It was not provoked by a few "nostalgics." On the contrary, the revolt of the Albanian people comes from the future. It is a first sign of the resistance of the "fourth world" to the new capitalist barbarism which is spreading across the planet.

This is not the dawn of global socialist revolution. But it is a nightmare for the forces of reaction and counter-revolution. It is subversion of the existing order in the "new Europe." It suggests that bourgeois hegemony is not the only possibility.

The radical left should not just express its sympathy with the Albanian insurrection, or regret the fact that more detailed information about life in the rebel zones is not available. It should protest vigorously against the indifference of western rulers to this human suffering, and expose the selfish and cynical manoeuvres of the European powers in Albania. There is a need for international resistance to the international plans to repress this insurrection.

Nicos Yannopoulos organises the Greek "Network for the defence of political and social rights." Two weeks after the Albanian insurrection started he spent ten days in the South of the country, where he held long discussions with the

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leaders of the National Committee of Public Salvation, and the leaders of the Popular Committees in a number of towns, including Saranda, Vlore, Tepelene and Gjirocastre.

This report has been re-edited for an international audience by Georges Mitralias and Mark Johnson.