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Religion in Post-Communist Albania

INA MERDJANOVA

Albania is the only communist country where religion was completely banned (in 1967) and which was proclaimed "atheistic" by the 1976 constitution. After the disintegration of the communist system and the abolishment of the old restrictions on religious freedom in 1990, the religious communities attempted to reconstruct their institutions and religious life. They have encountered serious resource problems, however, as the state has been too slow to pass new legislation which guarantees the restitution of property of the various religious communities previously confiscated by communists. Consequently, all the religious communities depend heavily on foreign aid.

The two Muslim communities

The Sunni community reconstituted itself in February 1991 under the leadership of Hafiz Sabri Koci (who had been persecuted by the Hoxha regime for his beliefs and spent 23 years in prison), and Sali Tivari.¹ They immediately established contacts with Islamic countries and organizations in order to receive the badly needed spiritual and material support. Important steps taken were the contract signed in 1991 for the country's membership in the Organization of Islamic Conference (which was however never ratified by Parliament because of a wave of strong criticism in the press, and the public debates about the geopolitical orientation of the country), as well as the establishment of the Islamic Development Bank in 1995. With foreign aid, Muslims built or rebuilt hundreds of mosques and opened ten religious schools. The support, coming mainly from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Libya, Turkey, and Malaysia, also provided religious literature, funds for the pilgrimage to Mecca, and scholarships for the study of Albanian students in

Albania is the only European country with a majority Muslim population—about 70 % of a total of 3.2 million and a Christian minority—approximately 20% belong to the Orthodox Church and 10% to the Roman Catholic Church. The Muslim population is further divided into a Sunni community (comprising about 55% of the whole population), a Bektashi community (about 15%), in addition to a number of Sufi brotherhoods such as Rifa'iyya, Qadiriyya, Khalwatiyya, among others, most of which are considered to be within the Sunni realm.

Islamic Institutes abroad. The Sunni community started several newspapers and established various associations. In 1996 the Albanian Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation was created under the directorship of Ramiz Zekaj. The institute focuses mainly on academic research and publications and plays an important role for the promotion of a "moderate" type of Islam with strong nationalistic connotations. In this respect the organiza-

tion fits into the trend towards an "Albanized" Islam that has been strong since the late nineteenth century. Zekaj does not see a contradiction in the relation between the universal umma and the ethnic identification "... because the idea of the umma is promoted ideologically and not in terms of a state. We have a more important task—to define our national identity ... The national cause is above all."²

Yet the Sunni Muslim community in Albania is far from united. Generally, it is divided into the followers of more nationalistically oriented tendencies and partisans of the idea of a pan-Islamic unity. This dispute seems to be, to a certain extent, an intergenerational conflict as the latter trend is represented mainly by younger Muslims who have studied in Islamic educational centres abroad. One should, however, not ignore the strong secular mood in Albania, in particular among intellectuals. Some of them, among whom is the renowned novelist Ismail Kadare, highly critical of Islam, even argue that Albania's Muslims, should return to their "original faith," Christianity, as a condition for their country's democratic development and reintegration in Europe.³

The much smaller Bektashi community has also struggled to rebuild its religious life after the collapse of the communist regime, but in their case foreign support has been limited, coming mainly from Iran. Only a few of the old tekkes (community houses) have been reopened. Moreover, the issue of communal leadership and its reproduction seems to be unresolved as yet.

One of the main religious issues in Albania concerns the relations between the Sunni and Bektashi communities. The debate about the relationship dates to the time before World War II, and continues today in one form or another, for example, in the internal dispute between the official Bektashi leader Baba Reshat Bardhi and the head of the tekke of Fushë-Krujë, Baba Selim. Only a few define Bektashiyya as a dervish order within the Sunni Islam; the vast majority of Bektashis treasure their independence from the Sunni community.⁴ People from both communities sometimes (but not always) perceive the distinction as more than intra-religious. Among representatives of the Sunni community the statement "We are Muslims and they are Bektashis" is not uncommon. Bektashiyya has often featured itself as "a different Islam" and even as a specifically "Albanian religion" and has played a considerable role in the nineteenth century construction of the national ideology.

Ethem Bey
Mosque, Tirana



PHOTO BY INA MERDJANOVA, 2003

Islam, society and politics

After the collapse of communism the state opted to have no proclaimed official religion, following the traditional approach which considers Albania to be a "country of three religions" rather than a Muslim state. According to the Constitution of 1998, there is no official religion and all religions are equal, yet the four predominant religious communities—that is, including the Bektashis as a separate community—enjoy a de facto recognition and privileged social status because of their historical presence.

The relations between the various communities are generally relaxed. This tolerance is related to the long history of multi-confessionalism and the traditional pragmatic attitude of the Albanians to religion, on the one hand, and to the considerable extent of the secularisation of society as a result of communist repression, on the other. Most Albanians consider their national identity of greater importance than their religious identification. Religious differences have never prevented collaboration in the name of "national interests," and cases of interfaith unions for the defence of autonomy are abundant throughout Albanian history. Ethno-national identity in Albania has thus provided an overarching and almost sacred canopy, which has downplayed, or powerfully refocused, identifications along religious lines.

The role of religion in society, while not negligible, is not to be overstated. Sometimes Albanians refer to an alleged "pro-Muslim" orientation of the opposition Democratic Party (in power until 1997) and tend to see the politics of the ruling Socialist Party as "pro-Orthodox." These claims are obviously connected to the Orthodox affiliation of the present prime-minister Fatos Nano and that of the president Alfred Moisiu, as well as to the correct observation that the electorate of the Democratic Party comes predominantly from the Sunni Muslim community (but also from Albanians belonging to the Roman Catholic tradition), while that of the Socialist party—from the Orthodox and the Bektashi communities. In addition, the Socialist Party has pursued a nationalist orientation bringing the country closer to Greece and Macedonia, rather than to the Muslim states.

Islam has lost some of the influence and popularity it gained immediately after the fall of the communist regime. The numerous mosques are hardly crowded with worshippers and some surveys have even indicated that the percentage of atheists among Albanians of Muslim background is higher than that among those of Orthodox or Roman Catholic tradition.⁵ The repression of what is defined as Islamic fundamentalism has intensified after 1997. A number of Arab Muslim activists and some NGOs have been banned from the country. The reasons behind the altering perceptions of Islam are connected to changes in the international situation after 9/11, on the one hand, and to the country's struggle to "move closer to Europe," "Europe" being identified as Christian, on the other hand.

The discourse of the European Union has become an essential part of the Albanian national discourse today. Despite the fact that Albania has not yet started negotiations for a future membership of the EU, the aspired membership is seen by and large as a panacea against the country's enormous problems connected to regional insecurity, mass poverty, widespread criminality, weak civic order, and the lack of democratic traditions. Moreover, this future union with the European mainland is often perceived as a solution to the unsettled "national question" as well, providing a "natural" and peaceful unification of all Albanians (major Albanian communities being in Albania proper, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro) in the framework of the EU. Also for this reason Muslims in Albania emphasize that they are actually "European Muslims."

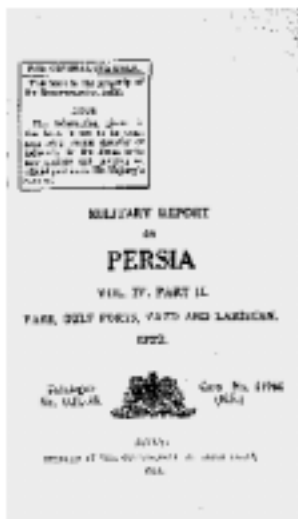
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Notes

1. In January 2003 Sali Tivari was shot dead. To this day the murder has not been solved.
2. Ramiz Zekaj, interview with the author, December 2003.
3. See Tonin Gjura, "A Stable Ecumenical Model? How Religion Might Become a Political Issue in Albania," *East European Quarterly* 34, no. 1 2000: 38.
4. About the internal struggles in the Bektashi community see Nathalie Clayer, *Religion et nation chez les albanais XIXe-XXe siècles* (Istanbul: ISIS, 2003), 416–17.
5. Ibid., 321.

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