



Democracy and Cultural Factors: The Case of Albania

Blerina Sadiku

*Dr., Department of Public Administration
Faculty of Political Science and Law
Universiteti "Aleksandër Moisiu",
Durrës, Albania*

*Received: 23 September 2023 / Accepted: 30 October 2023 / Published: 23 November 2023
© 2023 Blerina Sadiku*

Doi: 10.56345/ijrdv10n305

Abstract

In the context of democracy, the world is divided between nations who are thought to be democratic par excellence, while others embark on a challenging path to democracy. Albanians have sought for democracy since the fall of dictatorial regime in 1990. The pursuit of this ideal has been impaired by substantial governmental challenges in key areas of the country. Nowadays, concerns have arisen even in the most democratic countries, because of the discontent that exists among their citizens. In regions like the Balkans, a new term has emerged: "stabilitocracy". This concept seeks to examine the complex reasons behind countries that appear to be democratic but struggle to fully embrace democratic principles. In these nations, the three fundamental pillars of democracy as the rule of law, human rights, free and fair elections, and fair representation by state authorities, remain vulnerable. However, in the Albanian context, these elements have remained unstable since the aftermath of the dictatorial regime. Scholars analyze the fact that democracy in a country is influenced by their culture and economic development. When either of those components fails to align with the democratic ideal, democracy will be at risk, or it will lead the ground for the creation of an alternative political regime. This study searches into Albania's path towards democracy, with a focused exploration of the factors shaping this unique form of "democracy" that is emerging in the current context.

Keywords: *democracy, Albania, regime, culture*

1. Introduction

The concept of modern democracy emerged from the inherent human desire for participation in the governance of their societies and states. While debates on democracy date back to ancient times, it is important to mention that the significance of this term has evolved substantially over the years.¹ Consequently, comparing modern democracy to its historical origins reveals a notable transformation of the concept. As Dahl writes, democracy can be invented and reinvented "whenever the appropriate conditions exist", therefore we cannot refer to a continuous democracy since the ancient times.²

During the early modern era, philosophers began engaging in discourse regarding the significance of democracy, laying the foundations for contemporary schools of thought on the subject. A significant historical period for individual human rights was the Enlightenment. Since this revolution, many constitutional charts [later constitutions] started to formalize the necessity of the principle of rule of law as a fundamental aspect of their state's apparatus. While, during the

¹ See more: Sartori, 1957, p. 154-155; 164-167. Dahl, 1998, p. 7-10.

² Dahl, 1998, p. 9. See more: Sartori, 1957, p. 154.

20th century, nation states aimed to fully implement this principle in their governance.

Nation-states primarily emerged in Europe, where the Enlightenment revolution catalyzed a division between industrialized, developed countries on one side and agricultural, less developed societies on the other. This division significantly influenced the establishment of democratic regimes.

1. Economy, culture, and politics are three components that exert influence on one another in the context of the state's activity. If a country is deemed democratic, it should have a high level of civic culture³ and a developed economy. Conversely, if the political regime is unstable, there cannot be guarantee for a democratic regime, a sustainable economic growth and neither a high level of civic culture. However, it is worth noting that discontent can arise even in the well-known democratic countries like the United States of America, Great Britain etc.⁴ Considering the latest data and developments⁵, probably democracy will be reshaped in future through new elements that might bring the creation of new political regimes.
2. Recent discourse on new political regimes has been focused on the Balkan region. Albania, as part of the Balkans, is considered by some authors⁶ to be experiencing a new regime called stabilitocracy. This term denotes a blend of democratic and autocratic elements. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to analyze the concept of democracy by focusing on the case of Albania, while considering the cultural and economic factors in this context.
3. Democracy was sought by Albanians since the aftermath of the dictatorial regime. Despite Albania's relative stability and ongoing efforts to reform its state structures, considering it a fully democratic country remains still a challenge. The core pillars of democracy like the rule of law, human rights, free and fair elections, and representation of the citizens by the elected members in the state's apparatus have been ameliorated through the years, yet there is discontent in the Albanian people. This discontent for the "Albanian democracy" is expressed, among other factors, also in the migration and "brain drain" phenomenon that comes because of this social issue.⁷
4. In the first decade after the fall of communism, the country was not ready at all for a democratic state and society due to the turmoil that was created as soon as the dictatorial regime fell. The rule of law could not be established during this time since many former communist party's representatives were still governing in newly named political parties. The public administration encountered obstacles regarding human capital since there was no transparency in the recruitment process, among other issues. The justice system underwent a comprehensive reform only in 2016 [two thousand and sixteen] through the vetting process, which required another constitutional amendment in 2022 [two thousand and two]. Therefore, one of the most important pillars of democracy as justice is for citizens, is still under reform. The elections in Albania have always been contested by the opposition since the early 1990s. For this reason, the country is still facing problems in the context of establishing a democratic regime. Nevertheless, it shows some degree of stability on the international arena which might soon prove that Albania leans more towards stabilitocracy rather than democracy.

2. The Concept of Democracy and its Relation to Culture

Democracy and culture are two broad concepts which have been defined in various ways by authors. In a general sense, democracy is described as "a system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives".⁸ However, the question arises of how effectively a government represents the interest of each citizen at any given moment. The discourse for a democratic regime started to gain prominence in the late 17th century. In the last decades, many countries have struggled to achieve this regime, and some others are still following this path. It is important to acknowledge that democracy cannot be universally applicable to every country, due to the cultural differences that exist among them. Nevertheless, there are some criteria on which a democratic regime is

³ The civic culture in this context is referred to the definition given by Almond and Verba. In participant political culture, the individuals are expected to participate in the way they are governed by their state authorities.

⁴ Birch, p. 9-106.; Foa et al.

⁵ Foa et al.

⁶ Pavlov; Bieber; Zweers et al.

⁷ UN Albania Annual Progress Report 2021, p. 6.

⁸ Oxford Languages. Definition of Democracy.

based on, and therefore a country can be evaluated on these criteria for the democratization of its own regime. These criteria encompass: the rule of law, the guarantee of basic human rights, the conduct of free and fair elections, and equitable representation of the population at all levels of government activity. While this definition lays the groundwork for democracy, its practical application can encounter several changes since individuals might complain about its implementation in the central and local level of government. Paradoxically, the fact that individuals can complain about their government (central and local ones) constitutes a democratic aspect itself. In this context, the perceptions and reactions towards the political regime constitute an important pillar to democracy. If there is a democratic regime, the political culture should be participative⁹.

Democracy comes from the Greek word “demos” and “kratos”, which mean that the power stays on the hands of the people, therefore the latter determine the way they want to be governed. In the definition of the Council of Europe, it is accepted that we can best understand democracy by understanding first “what is not democracy”.¹⁰ In this context, “democracy is not autocracy or dictatorship... it is not oligarchy”.¹¹

For a country to guarantee a democratic regime, their culture should be easily adapted to changes. A fundamental debate in this context revolves around the perspectives of primordialists and the constructivists.¹² Primordialists contend that culture is inherited, and it has been “fixed since the primordial”.¹³ According to them, it exists before politics, therefore, it influences politics and “remains unchanged by political interaction”. In contrast, constructivists argue that culture is constructed or invented rather than inherited. Therefore, in this view, culture can easily adapt to changes and accept the democratization of the country. Nevertheless, constructivists consider the speed of adaption can vary from one country to the other.¹⁴

Fukuyama’s analysis emphasizes the assistance required by “weaker” states, encompassing four key components: planning and organizational management, institutional planning, legitimacy basis, and social and cultural factors. Notably, the transfer of these factors from one institutional actor to another is not always straightforward, neither it is from “stronger” states to “weaker” states since culture cannot be easily reshaped. Fukuyama illustrates this fact by contrasting the post World War II interventions in Japan and Germany with their pre-war conditions. These interventions aimed at reshaping the basis of legitimacy in these countries.¹⁵

Clark et al. identify two other factors that contribute to the democratization of the country: economy and religion. States who have a developed economy can easily implement democracy. Some religions, on the other hand, pose more obstacles for countries/states to have a democratic regime.¹⁶ Nevertheless, what brings countries to a democratic regime is the civic culture that should exist in the society. “*Democracies are maintained by active citizen participation in civic affairs, by a high level of information about public affairs, and by widespread sense of civic responsibility*”.¹⁷ Therefore, democracy and culture constitute an interdependent relationship. In countries where the democratic regime prevails, the political culture and the civic culture should stand at a considerably high level.

3. The Journey of Albania Toward Democracy Since 1990

3.1 Striving for Democracy after the collapse of Communism

Albanians’ quest for democracy began immediately after the fall of the dictatorship regime. During this time, the nation faced significant turmoil, marked by newfound freedoms of expression on the other hand. However, the establishment of democracy remained elusive due to the challenges posed by the transition of power. Massive emigration became an immediate concern for the country and its citizens. The political elite lacked stability in governing effectively during this period.

The newly elected representatives of the Democratic party of Albania did not apply a stable democratic governance. Militants were assigned to public functions and to the public services, amid the chaos. This fact strongly

⁹ Referring to the definition and classification of political culture by Almond and Verba

¹⁰ Council of Europe. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/democracy>

¹¹ *ibidem*

¹² Clark et al. p. 214

¹³ *ibidem*

¹⁴ *ibidem*

¹⁵ Fukuyama, p. 71, 72.; See more: Dahl, 1988, p. 156.

¹⁶ Clark et. al, p. 229-235

¹⁷ Almond and Verba, p. 9

damaged the basic principles of democratic governance since qualified individuals were not able to get a job in this sector. Consequently, the public administration was administered “as private property”, leaving the voices of most of the citizens unheard.

The judicial system of Albania had not been adequate for more than two decades. The denial of a fair trial has compressed the basic human rights for many years. The property rights, in this transitional period, were not properly administered by the state and judicial authorities. First, the country went from collective property to private property, and the market economy [which did not properly work during this time]. Second, the judicial system could not grant proper justice during the first decade after the fall of communism, due to the increased corruption among judges and other public officials.

Soon after the change of the regimes, neither free nor fair elections were granted to the people. In 1997, the civil unrest brought the country back to turmoil, and democracy far from the implementation as a form of government.

In Albania, most of the statal reforms, that aimed to achieve a democratic regime, have been achieved only in the last decade, though many obstacles are still persistent. One of the key driving forces for these reforms has been the aspiration for European Integration. These achievements have been influenced by the political culture of the Albanian society, characterized by what Almond and Verba would describe as “a subject political culture”. In this category, the political elites have been accepted by the population, and there is a minimum of interaction by the citizens, despite their clear discontent with the way that the country is governed.

During the first decade after 1990, none of the democratic pillars could be implemented in the Albanian reality [state and society]. The rule of law, human rights, free and fair elections were nearly inexistent. Economic development was slowed further not only by the inadequate governance but also by the civil war in 1997.¹⁸

3.2 The European Integration Criteria- Transforming the concept of democracy.

Albania’s road to the European Integration has been linked to the difficult democratization of the country. This journey began in 1992, after the ratification of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the Albania and the European Union. In 2003, after the Summit of Thessaloniki, Albania became a potential candidate of the European Union, as part of the Balkans region. The country signed the stabilization and association agreement in 2006, while it received its candidate status in 2014. During these years, it [Albania] has benefited from various financial European Union programs which have been implemented in multiple sectors of the country, from the central government to the agriculture. Parallel to this integration process, Albania has been supervised by the European Union’s authorities, to evaluate the implementation and outcomes of these financial aids. As reported by the annual reports of the European Commission, Albania had made moderate progress while there is required more transparence in the financial issues of the governance.¹⁹

Another important step towards the integration process was granted to the Albanians in 2010, when they were admitted to travel visa free to the Schengen area. However, the negotiation process of Albania with the European Union was opened in July 2022. Yet, the country should make considerable progress in the field of good governance and economic growth and stability, to gradually fulfil the chapters of the Acquis.

Albania’s road to the European Union has been relatively a long one. After 1993, the countries aspiring to enter the European Union would have to fulfill the Copenhagen criteria: the political, economic, and legislative criteria. The political criteria requires a country to have a democratic regime and the rule of law, where all the citizens’ demands could be fairly represented in the governance by respecting their human rights. The economic criteria necessitate a functioning market economy. The legislative criteria demand that all the aspiring members of the European Union should align their legislation with the acquis, and the public administration must possess adequate human capital to meet the European Union standards.

In the 1990s, it was considerably difficult for the country to achieve this integration process, considering the turmoil of the statal and societal structures of that period. There was extensive difficulty in drafting the proper laws for the Albanian state and the government, despite Albania’s membership in various international organizations since the fall of dictatorship. During this transitional period, the articles of the Constitutional amendment of 1993 were translated from the Convention on Human Rights and “not further harmonized with the rest of the provisions”.²⁰ Albania adopted its Constitution in 1998, and a year later the Albanian Parliament adopted the Law no. 8454 “On the People’s Advocate

¹⁸ *The World Bank. GDP per capita.*

¹⁹ *European Commission Progress Report 2021, p.*

²⁰ *Evis Alimehmeti, p. 44*

Institution". Only in these years could the human rights of the people be supervised and respected, even though it was only the beginning for these Albanian institutions to work effectively.

Considering the overall situation in Albania there were not many traces of the market economy. Among other issues, this outcome was due to the inappropriate functioning of the statal structures, including mainly the judicial system which could not guarantee a fair trial because of the issues of corruption. Therefore, the situation in the country was far from achieving the Copenhagen criteria.

Nowadays, various reforms have been drafted and implemented, but various obstacles are going on. Indeed, the country has opened the negotiations with the European Union, but the overall performance of the Albanian state is not yet at an adequate level, as indicated also in the report of the European Commission for year 2021. The fact that Albania has been accepted to open the negotiations with the European Union shows two dimensions: the first is that Albania is a stabilitocracy since it started the negotiation process, even though the country's achievements towards democracy are not fulfilled²¹, but it is accepted in the international arena, and the second fact is that Albania has a much work ahead to establish a full democratic regime in the country.

In the latest report of the European Commission on Albania, in the section about "Democracy", the country is evaluated to have organized well the elections, but many sensitive issues occurred during this time. There was a leaking of personal data regarding the political preferences of citizens, a misuse of public resources and functions, and vote buying.²² The fact that in the report it is written that these issues are being investigated, this might be considered as a democratic process. Regarding the rule of law and the fundamental human rights, Albania has achieved important progress. This progress is due to the justice vetting reform in the country. However, there has been no progress on the freedom of expression "over the reporting period"²³, which is one of the main pillars of democracy. This step back mirrors the fragility of the democratization's progress of the country, on the other hand.

Furthermore, one of the most important sectors of the country, the public administration, has made "moderate" progress in the way its activity is administered. After more than 30 [thirty] years that the dictatorial regime has felt, the public administration in Albania is invited to "encourage the merit-based implementation of the civil service law at all the levels, especially at the local level where de-politicization of civil service and also better training are needed...".²⁴

Regarding the economic criteria, the country is evaluated to have made a moderate progress in the further development of the market economy, even though Albania had "a double shock" after the earthquake of 2019, and the pandemic period.²⁵

3.3 Culture as a determinant factor of democracy and stabilitocracy as a political regime in Albania

The term democracy, even though it has remained etymologically the same since antiquity, the societies' values have obviously changed and adapted to the new forms of behavior and perceptions.²⁶ Different schools of thought, as that of the primordialists and constructivists, value culture as a determinant factor to politics, in different levels of influence. Political regimes are impacted by cultural and societal factors as well. Throughout history, societies have exhibited varying degrees of determination during critical moments. Some of the societies have overthrown various political regimes, while others have not shown determination in doing this action. Therefore, these people's actions depend considerably on their culture and beliefs about politics [political culture].

Since 1990, Albania has had few political parties which have governed the country. All the elections have been won by the democratic and the socialist party since 1990, and their respective coalitions. Unlike other democratic countries, the Albanian governments have stayed longer in power due to "artificial" separation of powers in the country. In a parliamentary democracy, the motion of confidence should be used by the authorities to solidify the democracy in the country. In the overall Albanian parliamentary since 1990, this instrument of the separation of powers has been used in very few cases. Despite the various conflicts or sporadic cases of fatalities because of inappropriate governance by the local and central government, the elected and other public functionaries hardly resign as a sign of civic culture. On the other side, the Albanian society reacts only in few cases. One such case resulted in the resignation of Prime Ministers

²¹ In the last Progress report of Albania by the European Commission, it is written that there is no improvement towards the freedom of expression, which is one of the most important freedoms in a democratic society. p. 6.

²² European Commission Report on Albania 2021, p. 9.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 6

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 7

²⁶ See more: Sartori, Chapter X: *Democrazia degli antichi e democrazia dei moderni*.

during the civil unrest in 1998. Also, other higher range authorities like ministers hardly resign if there is an issue in their public/private activities. All these facts show some concerns with the overall Albanian political culture. In other countries, protests have often prompted high and low-ranking representatives to resign.

Since 2013, Albania is being governed by the socialist party and its coalition. For the first time in "the pluralist" Albania, a political party has three consecutive mandates. There is discontent in the Albanian society due to the high flux of immigration, and other social issues concern its people, but there can hardly be noticed a reaction by the society due to other interconnected social and economic factor.

On the other side, Albania has opened the negotiations with the European Union, even though several problems are persisting in regard to the democratic regime, which is a crucial point in order to grant the country to be a member of the European Union. Therefore, authors have coined stabilittocracy as a new term to describe these political regimes, which have a difficult path to democracy and are not yet democratic countries. Due to the actual developments, Albania is one of the stabilittocracies because it is accepted by the international community yet there are several undemocratic developments in the country.

4. Conclusions

Democracy, a term with deep historical roots, captures the idea that individuals should possess the power to influence how they are governed by their authorities. Over time, the perception of democracy has evolved significantly. Even in most developed countries, discontent among the population persists, while in less developed countries, dissatisfaction has long been a prevailing sentiment which does not necessarily bring to the reaction of the society to change current circumstances.

Albania's journey towards democracy since the fall of its dictatorial regime is marked by substantial challenges and gradual progress. State and political authorities are working to overhaul crucial sectors such as public administration and the justice system. However, the justice system's fragility remains a significant obstacle, delaying the full realization of human rights, an essential pillar of democracy. Additionally, political elections have consistently been controversial affairs, with opposition parties frequently voicing concerns about them.

Yet, Albanian society finds itself somewhat detached from active participation in governmental decision-making processes due to the perception of political culture. Discontent rises, as citizens feel their opinions are often disregarded by both local and central government authorities. Otherwise, the phenomena of emigration and brain drain would not have been on the current stages. The divide between governance and the governed underscores the ongoing struggle to establish a robust democracy in Albania.

The challenges that the country faces, from judicial reform to electoral integrity, mirror the broader tests encountered by countries aspiring to uphold the democratic principles of rule of law, human rights, and free and fair elections. As the world continues to evolve, so will the understanding and implementation of democracy.

In the end, the quest for democracy is a continual and evolving process, one that challenges both developed and developing nations to adapt and redefine their democratic aspirations. Albania's experience offers valuable vision into the complex nature of the democracy and the difficult but necessary path to its full realization.

References

- Alimehmeti, Evis (2002). The Concept of Effective Remedies in the Albanian Legal System, Particularly as Regards Meeting its Obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights, (art. 13). MPhil thesis The Open University.
- Almond, G., Verba, S. (1989). The Civic Culture. Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations. SAGE: California. Bieber, F. *The Rise (and Fall) of Balkan Stabilittocracies. Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* No. 10, The Belt and Road: Pledge of The Gragon (WINTER 2018), p. 176-185
- Birch, S. (2014). Citizens Excluded. Democracy in Britain. Ed. Guy Lodge and Glenn Gottfried. Institute for Public Policy Research: London. Council of Europe. Human Right Themes. Democracy. Retrieved from <https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/democracy>. (May 20, 2022)
- Clark, W., Golder, M. Golder, S. N.. (2013). Principles of Comparative Politics. Second Edition. Sage: USA.
- Dahl, A., R. (1998). On Democracy. Yale University Press: USA.. European Commission. Albania 2021 Report. Retrieved from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/albania-report-2021_en (August 30, 2022)
- Foa, R.S., Klassen, A., Slade, M., Rand, A. and R. Collins. 2020. "The Global Satisfaction with Democracy Report 2020." Cambridge, United Kingdom: Centre for the Future of Democracy.
- Fukuyama, F. (2013). Ndërtimi i shtetit. Qeverisja dhe Rendi Botëror në Shekullin e Njëzet e një. Përkth. Shehu, Erion. AILS: Tiranë.

- Pavlovic, S. (2017). West is best: How 'stabilitocracy' undermines democracy building in the Balkans. Retrieved from <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2017/05/05/west-is-best-how-stabilitocracy-undermines-democracy-building-in-the-balkans/> (June 1, 2022)
- The Cultural Determinants of Democracy and Dictatorship. Retrieved from https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/81275_book_item_81275.pdf. (May 20, 2022)
- The World Bank. GDP per capita (current US\$)- ALBANIA. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=AL> (September 1, 2022)
- UN Albania Annual Progress Report 2021. Retrieved from <https://albania.un.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/UN%20Albania%20Annual%20Progress%20Report%202021.pdf> (August 30, 2022)
- Sartori, G. (1957). *Democrazia e definizioni*. Il Mulino: Bologna.
- Zweers, W., Cretti, G., De Boon, M., Dafa, A., Subotic, S., Muk, M., Fetahu, A., Imeri, A. A., Kuhnja, E., Kujrakovic, H.. (February, 2022). The EU as a promoter of "Stabilitocracy" in the Western Balkans?. Retrieved from <https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/the-eu-as-a-promoter-of-democracy-or-stabilitocracy.pdf> (June 1, 2022)