Albania: a nation of unique inter-religious tolerance and steadfast aspirations for EU integration[1]

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Abstract

Religious freedom has been always considered as a strong indicator democracy and institutional set up in a country.

Ex- communist countries in their efforts to set up a state of law and foster democracy, particularly, are more sensible toward indicators such as religious freedom, tolerance and diversity considering them strong components of their social tissue necessary to set up a functional democracy.

Their past legacy and history, are strong factors influencing their present and future.

Analyzing the past, present and future of a country's religiosity, religious freedom and tolerance, represent a valid contribution not only in terms of social assessment. They also compound a first layer for policies and strategies to create open societies and reinforce the institutional set up and rule of law.

Albania, among these countries, represents a very unique case of variation in attitudes and relation toward religion along history. But a strong tolerant component characterizes the overall perception and behavior toward religious diversity.

A historic, politic and social analysis of the Albanian case of religious tolerance and co-existence, necessary to understand the real western inspiration of the country and its democracy's future, is the biggest contribution of this paper.

Keywords: Albania, European Union, Religious tolerance, Corruption, NATO, Albanian Orthodox and Muslim population, Communism, United States

Religious Freedom in Albania

Religious freedom, for the past century, is a key indicator of the state of democratic institutions in a nation. What is the situation in Albania?

[1] T.P.Melady, "Religious Freedom in Albania", Ambassador's Review, 2010, Fall edition, re-elaboration.

First, the State's official position on religious freedom is normally reflected in the constitution. The legal and policy framework of Albania is favorable to religious freedom. While the current constitution provides for freedom of religion, there are other laws and policies that have contributed to the generally free practice of religion in Albania.[2]

The 2009 International Religious Freedom report issued by the US Department of State made the following declaration about religious freedom in Albania:

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice... The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Government is secular.[3] According to the Constitution, there is no official religion and all religions are equal; however, the predominant religious communities (Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Catholic) enjoy a greater degree of official recognition (e.g., national holidays) and social status based on their historical presence in the country. Official holidays include holy days from all four predominant faiths.[4]

Albania, Religion and communism

The state of religious freedom in Albania today is totally different from the period during the Hoxha communist dictatorship. Enver Hoxha, soon after taking leadership of the Democratic Front in 1945, instituted drastic changes.

Under the August 1945 Agrarian Reform Law, Albania's arable land was redistributed to put an end to large land ownerships and to increase farm output. Properties of religious institutions were among those nationalized, and the holdings of monasteries, religious orders, dioceses and the like were limited to 20 hectares. Many of the clergy and religious followers were tortured and executed. In 1946, all foreign Roman Catholic clergy were expelled---a crippling blow for the numerous Catholic schools and welfare institutions in the country.[5]

The policy of the Hoxha dictatorship stems from Hoxha's own views about religion. He was violently anti-religious, and his announced goal was to make Albania an atheist state. It is for this reason that the communist period in Albania was more severe for the country's religious institutions than most of the other eastern European and Balkan communist countries.[6]

[2] http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168289.htm

[3] http://www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2010/07/correspondents_diary_0

[4] http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,,,ALB,,502105e2c,0.html

[5] http://www.opendemocracy.net/bernd-fischer/albania-and-enver-hoxhas-legacy

[6] "A stable ecumenical model? How religion might become a political issue in Albania" Tonin Gjuraj. East European Quarterly.34. 1 (Spring 2000): 21-49.

The anti-religious period of the Hoxha dictatorship reached a high point with the 1976 Constitution. Article 55 banned "fascist, anti-democratic, religious, war-mongering, and anti-socialist activities and propaganda...as well as the incitement of national and racial hatred."

The Hoxha nightmare, which did eventually end, was an anomaly in Albanian life. In previous periods as far back as the 19th century, Albania was known as a land of tolerance. While the 19th and early 20th centuries saw the Muslim noble class as the ruling elite of Albania, these periods were characterized by tolerance for other religious groups.

Even after five centuries of Ottoman rule, under which 70 percent of the Albanian population converted to Islam, there was still tolerance of other faiths and beliefs. The various Albanian constitutions before the Hoxha dictatorship all declared that Albania had no official religion, indicated that religions were respected and stated that all Albanians had the right to choose their religious preference or to eschew religious affiliation if they wished. These were the true feelings of the Albanian people, and these feelings and beliefs---along with religious pragmatism---were an intrinsic part of Albanian culture.[7]

Albanian's religiosity, today's feature of tolerance and legacy

Once the brutal dictatorship of Enver Hoxha ended, Albania returned to its long, solid tradition of religious tolerance.

The legacy of the past is a major handicap for Albania. The post-Communist government was faced with the reality that Albania, for centuries, was one of the poorest countries in Europe.

History has had a significant impact on contemporary Albania. In some ways, Albania was looked upon negatively by the Western European establishment.

Albania has never received credit in the post-Communist era for its commitment and practice of religious freedom. This is most likely rooted in the pre-Communist period of Albania. The culture of this predominantly Muslim country was always tolerant of other religions. The only non-tolerant period before the Communist era was during World War II when Albania was occupied by the Axis fascists.

Today, religious institutions play a major role in the field of education.

Post communist Albanian Governments, particularly those established after 2005 on the leadership of Prime Minister Berisha, showed a totally different attitude toward

[7] A stable ecumenical model? How religion might become a political issue in Albania
Tonin Gjuraj. East European Quarterly 34. 1

religion not simply regarding the respect of religious freedom among Albanian citizens, but at the same time, issues like religious education, has been dealt based in the same legal framework as other forms of education, while fostering the laic nature of the national education system.

Religious tolerance has been fostered, as well as the free will of Albanian to apply religion in conformity with law and established social norms have been reinforced. This because in Albania, actually, politic activity and religion have not been melted.

The Ministry of Education in Albania affirms that public schools are secular, and that ideological and religious indoctrination in public schools is prohibited by law. Of the more than 100 educational institutions affiliated with associations or foundations, 15 are religiously-affiliated.[8]

By law the religiously-affiliated schools must be licensed by the Ministry of Education, and curricula are required to comply with national education standards. Numerous state-licensed schools are overseen by Catholic and Muslim groups, which have not had any problems in obtaining licenses for new schools. The strong cultural factor of tolerance is present in the school system of Albania.

Albania is also setting a very good example for Kosovo, its recently independent neighbor.

The challenge in Kosovo for religious freedom may be even greater because of the background of alienation between the Albanian and Serb communities.

The Albanian leadership has been a significant force in promoting tolerance in neighboring Kosovo, another predominately Islamic nation.

Does an anti-Albanian bias exist?

My own impression is that an anti-Albanian bias still exists. The cultural divide between the Albanian-Muslim culture and Western Europe resulted in various cultural images that did not (and still do not) favor the Albanians.

But this attitude is changing. The increased pressure of the United States—through diplomacy, the US Agency for International Development and the Peace Corps—and Albania's growing rapport with Croatia and Macedonia through the Adriatic Charter are all indications of a changing attitude.

The strong support that Albania gave to neighboring Montenegro as it moved toward independence is also a good sign that a relationship based on mutual respect is

[8] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, United States Department of State. "International Religious Freedom Report," 2009.

developing. In my discussions with leaders from Croatia and Montenegro, it was very apparent that they wanted strong bilateral ties with Albania.

The United States and the European countries should assist Albania, a genuine example of such support is the one demonstrated by Austria, to identify other assets which can help to transform the country to a new level of prosperity.[9]

The Western community, having ignored Albania for so many decades, should reject its past policies, which never recognized the potential of this country on the Adriatic.

The Religion of Albania is "Albanianism"

In light of current US policy that calls for the deepening of the dialogue with predominantly Muslim countries, it is fortunate that on the shores of the Adriatic, within the heart of Europe, there is a country where 70 percent of the people subscribe to the Islamic faith and the two predominant Christian faiths---Orthodox Christian and Roman Catholic, constituting 20 and 10 percent of the population respectively---have total freedom.[10]

It is also a fact that this is not a recent phenomenon, but as Vaso Pashko, a 19th century Albanian intellectual, said, "The religion of Albania is Albanianism." This historic and intrinsic aspect of the Albanian culture serves as an example of religious freedom for other predominantly Muslim countries. It is a major reason for the positive bilateral relationship between the United States and Albania.

In my visits to Albania over the past decade, the main cultural characteristic that is always apparent in this religiously pluralistic state is tolerance. Albanians of the three major religions live in harmony with each other.

Pope John Paul II visited Albania on April 25, 1993, and consideration is being given to the establishment of a Catholic university in Albania. As the world community enters the second decade of the third millennium, Albania receives high marks for its commitment to religious freedom and tolerance.

Tolerance is part of the Albanian heritage. The Hoxha dictatorship was a cruel exception. The transition from extreme communist dictatorship in the late 1980s and early 1990s to democracy was difficult, but now democratic traditions have been re-established.

With the end of this period, the Albanian tradition of tolerance soon reemerged as an important factor in the civic and cultural life of the country. Albania shows that religious freedom and Islamic values not only can co-exist, but also can flourish together.

[9] http://www.diplonews.com/feeds/free/18_June_2012_139.php

[10] Percentages are based on estimates as provided in the World Factbook, 2010.

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