

Politization as an Electoral Tool: The 2021 Albanian Parliamentary Elections

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Abstract: Public debates in Albania suggest that one of the reasons the Socialist Party won its third consecutive term in government in the April 2021 parliamentary elections was its control over both the central state administration and 60 of the country's 61 municipalities, whose elections had been boycotted by the opposition two years earlier. Beyond the practices of vote buying or promises of future favors, which remain clientelistic mechanisms common to all large Albanian political parties, control over state institutions and their resources places the ruling party in a structurally favorable position. This paper, focusing on the 2021 Albanian parliamentary elections, through a qualitative analysis, aims to examine the politicization of the public administration, understood not only as an instrument of party patronage through which jobs in the public sector are offered in exchange for political support, a sub-form of clientelism, but also as a tool for mobilizing through ideology and potentially influencing through means of fear the voting choices of a group vulnerable to pressure, namely public employees.

Keywords: Albania, Politization, Patronage, Clientelism, Elections, Electoral Campaign, Public Administration

Introduction

Albanian public discourse mentions that clientelistic practices are present across major political parties, and this system gives the ruling party an advantage over the opposition. The Socialist Party (SP) won 74 of 140 seats in the April 25, 2021, parliamentary election, which enabled it to form its third consecutive government. According to OSCE/ODIHR (2021, p. 1), "The ruling party derived significant advantage from its incumbency, including through its control of local administrations, and from the misuse of administrative resources." The use of state resources for electoral purposes is not a new pattern in Albania, but in the 2021 elections there was a significant difference. The opposition withdrew from its parliamentary mandates in 2019, which prevented its parliamentary control over the government, and in the same year decided to boycott the local elections, giving the Socialist Party a very high level of control over the central and local administration and thus providing it with a level of electoral resources not observed in previous electoral cycles.

This paper contributes to the understanding of politicization in transitional democracies by examining the use of the public administration as an electoral resource during the 2021 Albanian parliamentary elections. The methodology involves qualitative analysis of sources such as official reports from national institutions and international organizations, Albanian legislation on public employment, media coverage of the electoral campaign and academic literature on political patronage and clientelism. It represents preliminary findings and it is part of a broader ongoing research on the politicization of the Albanian public administration.

Politization as clientelistic patronage during the 2021 elections

Scholars agree that it is impossible to speak of a totally neutral public administration even in consolidated democracies, and that in recent years these countries have experienced an increase in the degree of this phenomenon. But the politicization faced by the public administration in Albania in 2021 was different in scope and intensity from patterns typically observed in consolidated democracies.

Politicization, as defined by Peters and Pierre (2004, p. 2), is “the substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection, retention, promotion, rewards, and disciplining of members of the public service.” This definition resonates with that of Kopecký et al. (2016, p. 418) of party patronage, which considers it “... the ability of the political parties to appoint individuals to (non-elective) positions in the public and semi-public sector, including posts in core civil service, foreign embassies, state-owned companies, quangos or regulatory agencies, and the practical exercise of this ability.” However, the definition of Kopecký is more extensive since it includes cases when merit can be taken into consideration along with partisan criteria, as well as when a party can appoint a non-partisan person. Since there can be a single official, like a minister, to make the appointment, it is necessary that the mechanism of party control be strong enough to impose on the official the appointment of whoever the party proposes (Ibid.). Politicization or patronage in this sense can be considered in both a neutral and a negative connotation. In the neutral view, politicization is used in consolidated democracies as a means of controlling the state or making the bureaucracy more responsive to political programs and policy implementation (Kopecký & Maier, 2012). As a negative feature, it can be considered a clientelistic patronage form, as defined by Piattoni, when it is “... the instrumental use of positions of power to distribute jobs, goods and other public decisions to partisan supporters in order to maintain and strengthen positions of political power” (Piattoni, 2001, p. 6). When a merit-based system is replaced by patronage-based practices, it is expected that public employees base their decisions on political criteria when using or providing the wealth or other resources controlled by them (Müller, 2006).

Both forms of politicization were present in 2021 in the Albanian public administration. Studies on the country are mostly focused on the core civil service, since the creation of a stable and professional civil service, based on merit, moral integrity, political neutrality, and accountability (Law 152/2013), is a prerequisite for EU integration. As a consequence, only the core civil service is monitored periodically by the EU Progress Reports and SIGMA. It is important to stress that the core civil service is a fraction of all public employees, and the same merit-based standards do not apply uniformly to civil servants and other employees in the public administration (EC, 2020). Most public-sector employees work under the provisions of the Labor Code, which does not provide the same protection as the Civil Service Law.

Large staff turnovers have frequently occurred in the Albanian public administration with every change of government colors since its transition to democracy (Dhoga, 2022). After the SP took office in September 2013, according to the Albanian Ombudsman, in less than two years the number of laid-off public employees in 12 ministries that responded out of 17 in total was 4,093 (Avokati i Popullit, 2016). Since 2017, the SP has continued its incumbency with a monocratic government, and recruitments and dismissals have been more in line with the normal functioning of the administration. This does not mean that even the core civil service has been depoliticized. There was progress in the central state administration, although the Commissioner for the Oversight of the Civil Service highlighted that there were still some problems in the implementation of the law (KMSHC, 2021). At the same time, the implementation of the Civil Service in local government remained limited. Local Government Units manage their own civil service, and according to the Commissioner, in 2020, of 6,090 positions, 14% were filled not in compliance with the legal framework through temporary contracts or without competition (Ibid, p. 78).

There have been several reasons that facilitated the use of public resources as clientelistic patronage in the 2021 elections: firstly, Anna Grzymała-Busse (2007, p. 1) stresses, “...the degree to which governing parties can obtain private benefits from public state assets is constrained by robust competition: opposition parties that offer a clear, plausible, and critical governing alternative that threatens the governing coalition with replacement.” To measure opposition criticism, she used as an indicator the average number

of parliamentary questions asked by each party representative in parliament (Ibid.). In the case of Albania, in February 2019, the major opposition parties withdrew from the parliament. Their mandates were assigned to some remaining candidates on the party lists, who accepted them without the support of their respective parties and were subsequently expelled, or to candidates from minor political parties. This created a situation in which there was no cohesive or effective parliamentary opposition block. The decision of the main opposition parties to withdraw from parliament deprived them of the primary institutional mechanisms for controlling and criticizing the incumbent, a function that was also limited by their reduced capacity for extra-parliamentary actions. The situation became more critical with the decision of the major opposition parties, in the same year, to boycott the local elections of June 30, 2019. This gave the Socialist Party the opportunity to gain control of central and local government, thus providing it with a significant opportunity to use state resources such as jobs, goods, and other public decisions for the forthcoming 2021 elections. Consequently, during the parliamentary elections of 2021, the Socialist Party had an unprecedentedly large resource in the state since the fall of communism. Secondly, in Albania, working in the public administration is considered very attractive, since it offers better working conditions and higher salaries than most private-sector jobs. This, combined with the high unemployment rate, creates a high demand for public jobs, and political parties and their officials may use them as an electoral resource. Thirdly, the privatization of services was often contracted through clientelistic linkages. Studies show that businesses provide funds for electoral campaigns in exchange for future public procurements (Kera & Hysa, 2020), or that such linkages in some cases are strong enough to be considered practices of state capture (Transparency International & IDM, 2021). Finally, civil society organizations and media scrutiny are weak. In Albania, there are concerns about the freedom of media. According to the OSCE/ODIHR report on the parliamentary elections of 2021, "Media outlets often serve as lobbying platforms for their owners ... journalists remain vulnerable to pressure and corruption. ... interlocutors criticized the long-standing and widespread practice of the main political parties and public officials to provide media with pre-recorded or live footage of their activities" (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021, pp. 18, 20).

Politicization of public employees through mobilization and the use of fear

Politicization does not consist only of the control of politicians over the bureaucracy through appointments and dismissals based on partisan lines. Peters and Pierre (2004) stressed that the appointment of partisan loyalists to positions within the bureaucracy may not be crucial if political leaders are able to influence the behavior of personnel already in those positions. According to the authors, this could be achieved through two strategies: (1) using ideology and leadership to mobilize the public service, and (2) using means of fear, such as loss of employment, demotion, transfer, etc.

In Albania, the first strategy can be illustrated by the initiative undertaken by the government in 2018 with the "Administration We Want" program, which was similar to the slogan of the Socialist Party, "The Albania We Want." The first component, the orientation of the administration, included the alignment of public employees with the government's political program and main policies as a key measure. Its main benefit was the creation of a sense of identity and belonging, thus increasing the level of commitment and motivation among staff (administrata.al). This kind of politicization by mobilization is considered normal, and even necessary, by scholars of public administration. It is natural for a government to try to elicit a keen response from the bureaucracy for its political program and policy implementation.

The second strategy, using means of fear (loss of employment, demotion, transfer, etc.), raises legal and institutional concerns. Although several reforms have been implemented, the public administration is considered a sector vulnerable to political pressure, and the use of the

strategy of fear was reported in connection with the SP party during the campaign period. According to reports received by OSCE/ODIHR (2021, p. 16), “...many civil servants, a group vulnerable to pressure, were encouraged to vote for the ruling party.” Also, interlocutors of the European Network of Election Monitoring Organizations mission (ENEMO, 2021, p. 26) consistently raised the issue, among others, of abuse of state resources, vote-buying, “along with numerous allegations of pressure on state employees”.

Beyond the international reports, potential use of the strategy of fear can also be detected by monitoring the public declarations of party candidates during the electoral campaign. While the electoral campaign in Albania legally starts a month prior to the elections, mobilizing the public administration by means of pressure requires more time. Based on media monitoring, there are three examples that illustrate how this mechanism was used to influence the voting behavior of public administration employees for the incumbent party in the 2021 parliamentary elections worked: first, in September 2020, the Democratic Party (DP), the main opposition party in the country, accused the SP of distributing a form to be filled out by employees of the public administration, in which they had to collect the names, IDs, and telephone numbers of friends and relatives who would vote for the SP (Gazeta-Shqip, 2020). The Deputy Prime Minister considered this allegation false and asked each Democrat employed in the public administration to report if there had been any such cases of indirect pressure (Panorama, 2020). Soon, the DP brought two of these completed forms to public attention, one in the municipality of Fier and the other in a public institution from the same city, and stated that they were going to file criminal charges against the head officers of these institutions (PD, 2020). Second, during the electoral campaign, a dataset of around 900,000 voters from Tirana was leaked, and the media considered it to be part of the dataset of the SP. The dataset contained several personal data points, such as names and surnames, ID cards, telephone numbers, etc., including vote preferences from the previous two parliamentary elections. For each voter, a “patronazhist,” which in English can be translated as “who makes patronage,” or surveyor, was assigned to monitor them for the 2021 elections. There were claims reported in media that it was part of a more complex document covering voters across the entire country and that it provided for any needs they may have related to the public sector, such as legalizing their homes or obtaining licenses. “The leaking of sensitive personal data of some 900,000 Albanian citizens before elections, including their political preferences, was of serious concern and made voters vulnerable to pressure” (OSCE/ODIHR, 2021, p. 2). If the incumbent party knows, or pretends to know, for which political party someone voted previously, it can raise concerns about the secrecy of the future vote. This could make public employees’ voting choices more vulnerable. It is also notable that if the case of the form distributed to public employees was denied by government members, the existence of the “patronazhist,” many of whom were public employees themselves, was not only accepted by the SP but they were considered valuable members of the team before the elections and thanked by the Prime Minister in his speech at the election victory (Tiranapost, 2021; Oranews, 2021). Third, there were cases of explicit messages from SP candidates during the electoral campaign that can be considered a form of pressure on the voting choice of public sector employees, emphasizing that a change of government would undermine the security of their job positions. In March 2021, Pandeli Majko, a government minister and candidate for Tirana, declared in an interview on national television:

Imagine if the Socialist Party goes into opposition, the main blow won't be suffered by the Socialist Party MPs; it will be felt by the people who, for many reasons or no reason at all, will be fired from their jobs. We know this; it's a well-known story, written and unwritten.... It is important to win the elections and to be the shield of our people (Klan News, 2021, translated by author).

A more subtle, yet still clear, example of pressure was the declaration of the Prime Minister on 6 April 2021, almost three weeks before the election day. In a publicly released video of a telephone conversation with another candidate, the votes of teachers and nurses were specifically targeted, as follows: *Teachers and nurses have entered with merit, but they must defend it because with the vote in unknown direction they go in unknown direction* (A2CNN, 2021, translated by author).

Conclusions

Using state resources for electoral purposes is not a new phenomenon in Albania, but in the elections of 2021, there was a significant difference. The opposition withdrew from its parliamentary seats in 2019, which prevented its parliamentary control over the government, and in the same year decided to boycott the local elections, giving the Socialist Party a dominant position over both the central and local administration, and thus providing the incumbent with a level of electoral resources unprecedented in earlier elections.

Furthermore, using public resources as clientelistic patronage in the 2021 elections was facilitated by the attractiveness of working in the public administration, clientelistic linkages between the public and private sectors, and limited levels of media scrutiny. Drawing on policies, international reports, and analysis of public discourse during the electoral campaign, this study illustrates how both strategies of mobilization and the use of fear were employed to influence the voting choices of a group vulnerable to pressure, namely the public employees. However, this study has its limitations. While this study cannot determine the actual impact of these strategies on the practical voting behavior of public employees, nor the full scope of their use, it provides insights into how politicization can be used as an electoral tool in a transitional democracy such as Albania.

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