

# Albania: An Atheist State

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Isolation of the spirit is one of the most important principles upon which Albanian communists base their dominance. Nearly three quarters of the Albanian people were born after Enver Hoxha's seizure of power and so know no other political system than the so-called "worker's control". The remaining quarter, the middle-aged and older generation, consist in the main of illiterates – a late legacy of Ottoman domination. Thanks to this isolation, the ideologists of the communist Albanian Party of Labour (abbreviated as APL below) are able to falsify the recent church history of their country and their own propaganda from the years immediately before and after the end of the war to suit current requirements.

As its main argument in the struggle against Muslims, Orthodox and Catholics, the APL claimed that all three religious bodies would destroy the "National Uniqueness" of Albanians. In contrast, the "exploiting role" of the clergy was not attacked as in other communist countries. So the real motive behind the struggle against religion was not socialism but nationalism. Nationalism is the source of totalitarianism in Albania. The slogan, "The Religion of Albanians is Albanianism", which belongs to Enver Hoxha's current vocabulary, stems in fact not from Albania's socialist era, but was formulated by the nineteenth century poet Vaso Pasha.

The census of 1938 showed that of the then 1.1 million inhabitants (2.5 million at the end of 1972) 69% were Muslim, 20.7% Orthodox and 10.3% Catholic. 200 Albanians had admitted they were Jewish. This number grew to 300 by the end of the war because the German occupation forces, owing perhaps to the small numbers, had not persecuted the Jews.

The first statement from the Central Committee of the Albanian Communist Party (founded 8 November 1941) declared, among other things, that the communists must "struggle against the attempt by fascism to split up the Albanian people by means of religion". Following the seizure of power, however, they adopted exactly the same method as the Fascists.

First the Catholic Church was declared a foreign element. In 1939 there were 141 native and 62 foreign priests, 16 native and 16 foreign monks and 73 native and 60 foreign nuns. The first Franciscan monk had come to Albania around 1250; individual Jesuits from Dalmatia had begun to work in Albania after the middle of the 16th century and the

Order had put down permanent roots after 1812; the Society of St. Vincent had been active in Albania since 1919. Despite all this the communists in 1945 maintained that the majority of the Catholic clergy had first come to Albania with the help of Mussolini. Foreign priests and nuns were deported, after many had been murdered. Then began the eradication of the native church hierarchy. Archbishop Gasper Thaçi of Shkodër died in a concentration camp in 1946. In February 1948, four bishops were executed. That year, too, Archbishop Nikolla Vinçenc Prenushi of Durrës was sentenced to 20 years in prison and died soon after in unknown circumstances. Only Bishop Bernadin Shlaku of Pulati, then 75, on whom the communists in vain put pressure to set up a national church, remained physically unmolested. He is still alive today. The fate of the titular bishops later appointed by the Vatican is unknown. Most of them may have been "liquidated". In the spring of 1971 only 14 Catholic priests apparently remained alive, 12 of them in concentration camps and two in hiding. One of the latter two may have been discovered in the fall of 1973, for at that time a Catholic priest was arrested and charged with "theft of corn cobs" as the Albanian press put it.

By 1947 the entire material base of all three religious organizations had been nationalized. Their social and educational activity was handled in a variety of ways. The Catholic schools were placed under the control of the State by 1946. Catholic children's homes, of which the one in Shkodër alone sheltered more than 1,000 children, were closed only in May 1950. At the same time the Catholic orphanages were placed temporarily under an Islamic youth organization. Muslim and Orthodox schools enjoyed a reprieve. Their nationalization did not take place until 1949. Religious education still existed in many State schools until the summer of 1947 when the Ministry of Education issued a directive that a new educational system based on Marxist-Leninist principles be set up in all schools.

Following the break with Belgrade in 1948, the Albanian communists altered their religious policy. On 11 November 1949 they issued a decree "On Religious Societies", which obliged these societies to develop a feeling of loyalty among their members towards the system of "People's Control". This decree was modified on 10 April 1963, but the details are not known. On 5 April 1950 the regime proclaimed a decree "On the Approval of the Statute of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania". Because he had opposed the union with Moscow, the then Orthodox Archbishop of Tirana, Christoph Kisi, was deposed in April 1949. Also on 5 April 1950 the decree "On the Approval of the Statute of the Albanian Bektashi Congregation" was promulgated, and a month later, on 4 May

1950, there followed the decree "On the Approval of the Statute of the Albanian Muslim Society". The Islamic Bektashi sect, a humanistic and pantheistic society in orientation, had enjoyed a large membership since time immemorial. To differentiate between Muslim and Bektashi is, however, artificial, a further arbitrary act to split the nation by means of religion. Finally on 30 July 1951 the decree "Approval of the Statute on the Catholic Church of Albania" was issued: it stated that the Catholic Church of Albania was to have no organizational, political, or economic ties with the Vatican and that the coordination of religious questions must go exclusively through State channels. Subsequently on the anti-religious front a period of calm set in, at least outwardly. The phrase "Tolerated on the edge of society" could well describe the position of religious groups at this time.

The struggle against religion in its current, incomparably harsher phase, was inaugurated by Enver Hoxha in his speech of 6 February 1967. He declared Albania to be the "first atheist state of the world". All 2,169 religious establishments (including the 268 Catholic churches) were demolished or closed. The religious decrees of 1949-51 as well as all other laws and ordinances regulating religious life, were nullified as from 13 November 1967. The ideological justification for this was that the superstructure must "be cleansed of all antiquated and foreign elements". This new wave of persecution hit all three religious bodies extremely hard. The practice of religion was forbidden. A Catholic priest Shtefan Kurti was executed in 1973, simply because, while in a concentration camp, he had baptized the child of a woman prisoner. The entire hierarchy and most of the clergy of the Orthodox church are in prison. The head of the Albanian Orthodox Church, Archbishop Damian, died in prison in November 1973 at the age of 80, after being confined for six years. The fate of the Islamic hierarchy is unknown.

Although the organizations of the three religious denominations have been destroyed without trace, yet faith in God is still alive. It is the task of the Albanian Democratic Front to kill off such "religious survivals". As part of its anti-religious campaign, the Democratic Front sometimes has to give its members information on the religious situation through, for example, the daily newspapers. By piecing together scattered bits of information contained in the official Albanian Party press, the reader can construct a picture, at least in outline, of religious groups underground. Party functionaries, for example, complain that "in many administrative regions, holy places exist". Icons and crosses are still preserved in homes. Year after year hundreds of people from several administrative regions meet at the ruined church of Laç on their way to vote in the elections.

The Party particularly objects to the wearing of white wedding dresses, and yet women pay little attention and indeed wear white sometimes as a form of protest. An example of this from the city of Fier was described in the main publication of the Albanian Democratic Front :

On the last Sunday in July of this year (1973) 116 taxis were reserved. 116 weddings took place on that day. Among those married were workers, farmers, civil servants including Party members . . . The Front organizations in the villages and sections of the city remained silent. They were silent and did nothing about the well known fact that the white bridal dress is of religious origin. What is worse, certain people are using this custom for speculation and have set themselves up as "clothes brokers". They rent these clothes for the couple of hours of the wedding ceremony and demand State rates of money for it. The Democratic Front organizations know about this. They also know the "brokers", and yet they have chosen the way of silence . . .

When hundreds of believers gather beside a ruined church and 116 bridal couples join in a form of social action, they are protected from prosecution only by their numbers. Such behaviour is of course very dangerous.

There is an unbreakable sense of community among believers : many place a secret sign on their bodies as a witness to their faith. The secretary of the Council for the Democratic Front in the Puka Region wrote, for example : "Even today we find the cross or the crescent in the palm of older persons, but also on some young men and women. Some youths have a cross not only in the palm of the hand, but have scratched it into a finger, right on the spot where one would wear a ring. When asked about this, they reply that they did this when they were children". Similarly we learn from the Party press, that in secret Muslims continue to practise circumcision as before.

Albania according to Enver Hoxha is the "first atheist state of the world". All forms of organized religious life have indeed been destroyed, but despite everything many believers still maintain their faith in secret, in the face of very real dangers.