

Albania's Agony — A Million Rifles, a Culture of Vengeance

By Theresa Agovino
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Lushnja, Albania

Agim Sadikv claims to know those responsible for the mayhem that left one person dead and several injured at a campaign rally in this dusty coastal town last month.

When asked whether he will testify against them, Sadikv stared back with disbelief at what he considered a ridiculous question.

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"We are all eyewitnesses" was all the 34-year-old mechanic would say. "This is a small town. Everybody knows everybody else."

Edmund Mushi explained Lushnja's collective silence by taking a bullet from a Kalashnikov assault rifle he keeps in the back of his father's cafe, holding up the pointed golden slug and stating: "This is why there will never be justice in Albania."

One million Kalashnikovs were stolen from the government arms depots in the anarchy that followed the collapse of five

pyramid schemes that wiped out the life savings of many Albanians.

And as long as those weapons remain in the hands of a people with a notorious tradition of vengeance, it will be almost impossible to legally punish anyone for the estimated 1,800 killings that have racked this small Balkan nation since January. The death toll is 10 times that of the Oklahoma City bombing.

The violence has shattered post-communist Albania's once-optimistic spirit as well as its economy.

The people who boosted the newly elected Socialist government to its landslide victory in the June 29 elections are expecting the new leadership to detain and try those who caused the chaos. The voters blame former President Sali Berisha and his Democratic Party for the proliferation of the bogus investments and the debacle that followed their demise. They are demanding retribution for their money and their pain.

"I'm so sick about what happened here, watching Albanians kill Albanians," said Ermal Toto as he stood at a rally outside

Socialist headquarters. "We want to know what happened, we want transparency, we want justice."

But the combination of the guns, a corrupt judicial system, disillusioned police forces and backroom politics is expected to impede any investigations.

The realization that the path to justice will be long, contentious and divisive in an already despondent nation has led some politicians to consider a general amnesty.

"At some point, we have to put the past behind us, we have to start to forget, we have to think about the future," said Rexhep Mejdani, the former Socialist Party chairman who was elected Albania's president Thursday. "There has been such suffering here already."

Kathleen Imholz, who runs the Soros Foundation's legal education programs in Albania, said amnesty would set the wrong precedent as the country seeks to rebuild. "At some point, you have to teach people to be responsible for their actions," she said.

Amnesty would also be difficult for many to embrace.

In the north, many pledge allegiance to the Kanun of Leke, common law passed down from medieval times that regulates life in the community through the concept of honor and revenge. Under the code, it would be dishonorable not to avenge the murder of a relative.

The concept of an eye for an eye permeates the rest of Albania too.

Police in Lushnja, a central town, expect a spate of retaliation killing if the government doesn't act soon.

"Albanians don't forget. If people don't see the government doing something, they will do something themselves," said a policeman who requested anonymity.

The primitive form of justice, however, will do nothing to soothe the soul of a nation that longs to know who is ultimately responsible for its strife. And the truth may never emerge.

The Socialists may not wish to delve too deeply because they could end up implicating themselves.

Foreign diplomats and international



BY ASSOCIATED PRESS

Fatos Nano signed a document after being sworn in as prime minister

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monetary organizations are demanding a complete investigation into the pyramid schemes if Albania is to get any aid for rebuilding. But the finance minister at the time was a Socialist and a consultant to at least two of the schemes.

Moreover, there may be some truth to the Democrats' claims that Socialists incited people in the south to riot in the spring.

"Just how high up are they going to want to go?" asked one American lawyer, who also requested anonymity.

Some Democratic officials suspected of contributing to the violence, including the heads of the police and national guard, have already left the country.

Some diplomats also worry that political witch hunts could ensue as the Socialists seek revenge for indignities they suffered under Democratic rule.

Socialist leader Fatos Nano, who was sworn in as prime minister yesterday, spent three years in prison for a corruption conviction that was condemned as politically motivated by international human rights organizations.

"There is a fear Nano will be vindictive, that you'll only see selective justice," said Frank Dalton, country director in Albania for the Civic Education Project.

Countless other problems plague Albania's legal system. Outgoing Justice Minister Spartak Ngjela maintains that 60 percent of the country's 300 judges are corrupt; he won't even venture a guess on how many lawyers accept bribes.

Twenty-five courts were destroyed in the anarchy. Only 165 of the 1,209 prisoners that were released in the lawlessness have been recaptured. And police don't seem motivated to arrest new suspects.

When someone recently called the police station in Lushnja to report a suspected homicide, none of the eight officers in the room left to investigate.

Their apathy is understandable. The doorway and window frames of the dingy two-room building bear the black scorch marks from an earlier attempt to burn down the station. Two of the 100 people who died in Lushnja were policemen.

"We have to be careful because if we go to make an arrest, we can get killed," said one officer. "We have two tasks now. The first is to protect ourselves and then to do the utmost we can to protect the citizens."

He said there is little the police can do to investigate when the public refuses to cooperate. "The politicians created these problems, and it is up to them to find solutions," he said.