

Political Gridlock Blocks Albania's Recovery

Prime minister, former president in grim struggle

By Theresa Agovino
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Prime Minister Fatos Nano looked every bit the statesman in his double-breasted gray suit, as he sat in a huge conference room with gold furnishings, discussing the economic and political issues bedeviling Albania.

Firefighter's garb might have been more appropriate.

Most of Nano's seven-month



Albanian Prime Minister Fatos Nano has had to face several crises, leaving little time for reforms

tenure has been spent extinguishing one flareup after another. That has left little time to implement programs that could benefit a population ravaged by last year's collapse of bogus investment schemes, which cost many citizens their life savings and more than 2,000 people their lives in the ensuing riots.

"This is still a fragile situation," Nano said in a recent interview.

"The challenges are huge."

In late February, Nano had to send special troops to restore order in the northern town of Shkoder after an armed gang of alleged supporters of former President Sali Berisha took control of the city. The two-day ordeal was the worst incident of violence since Albania was engulfed by anarchy a year ago.

The event is the most recent example of how the deep-seated hatred between Nano's Socialists and Berisha's Democratic Party continues to dominate life in Europe's poorest country.

Berisha and his party have refused to take their seats in Parliament, hampering the passage of any legislation that could help stabilize the country. And they still

wield considerable power because Nano is constantly forced to react to their provocations.

Nano is widely credited with restoring order in the country after last year's lawlessness, which required the intervention of foreign troops to quell armed rebellions. He was named prime minister in October after the Socialists ousted the Democrats from power in a special election held last June to quell the unrest.

But the prestige of the accomplishment is quickly wearing thin; Albanians say it is impossible to feel truly secure when hundreds of thousands of guns looted from armories remain at large in a land with a tradition of settling disput-

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PRIME MINISTER'S STAND ON KOSOVO ISSUE

Prime Minister Fatos Nano's latest distraction from his duties in Albania is the crisis in Kosovo, the province in neighboring Serbia whose 90 percent ethnic Albanian population lives under virtual martial law.

Last year, Nano was criticized for downplaying the Kosovo issue during a meeting with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, who is responsible for the repression of the territory's Albanians.

Late last week, Nano, who opposes independence for Kosovo, urged Kosovars to resist violence and stressed that his government supports a diplomatic solution.

When a Cabinet member said Albanians would support

Kosovars in an armed conflict if necessary, Nano made sure the comment was retracted. He has been careful to toe the Western line — that Kosovo should remain part of Serbia, but with greater autonomy — because he wants to keep aid money flowing in.

It would also be disastrous for Albania's ailing economy if the country were flooded with refugees from Kosovo.

Even though most Albanians are ambivalent about their brethren across the border, Nano's main political rival, former President Sali Berisha, favors independence for Kosovo and will certainly try to use the recent violence to undermine Nano.

— Theresa Agovino

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es with bullets, not diplomacy.

Frustration and despair are rising because unemployment is acute — estimated at anywhere between 30 percent and 70 percent — and food prices continue to rise.

"I would give back 30 years of my life if I thought it would just give us some hope," said 70-year-old farmer Pal Mark Ujka.

"I'm afraid of both parties. Berisha ruined this country with the pyramid schemes. Nano grew up under communists; what does he know about democracy?"

"We need a superman, and we don't have one."

While Nano hasn't impressed many Albanians, he has pleasantly surprised the international community.

Some diplomats feared that Nano would be vindictive toward his rivals because he spent four years in jail under the Berisha regime. He was convicted of mishandling \$8 million in aid funds dur-

ing a brief 1991 stint as prime minister, but the charges are widely viewed as being false and politically motivated.

"He has not put crooks in the Cabinet. I had expected more roguish types," said one diplomat who requested anonymity. "There are a great number of decent, very good people."

The political gridlock began last fall, when Berisha's Democrats vacated their parliamentary seats after a Socialist member shot and wounded a Democrat in retaliation for an insult.

The Democrats maintain that the act was political, but most people agree that it was personal. Both lawmakers are from the North, where people still practice an ancient code of conduct that is based on honor and respect and enforced with bloody feuds.

The concept of a constructive opposition within a democratic framework is clearly unfamiliar to most Albanians.

"We have to change a 550-year-old mentality here," said Nano. "We are trying to bring the country out of recycling the past."

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), along with the European Union and the Council of Europe, has been attempting to negotiate a truce between the Democrats and Socialists. A new constitution is being drafted, and it will not carry much weight if the Democrats do not participate in the process.

OSCE Ambassador Daan Everts criticizes the Socialists for having fired many Democrats from government jobs, but he adds that the Democrats have handled their new status poorly: "They are in denial about losing and can't accept defeat. They think losing power means losing face."

The Democrats' habit of forcing the Socialists to constantly answer charges or investigate various acts of violence has won them few points with ordinary Alba-

nians.

"Nano is trying, but Berisha won't leave him to work," said Alma Marku, an unemployed clerical worker. "I believe Berisha is behind the violence. He is still messing up Albania. I wish he would just go."

By constantly calling for new elections and telling citizens not to return their looted weapons, the Democrats have created a climate that encourages such incidents as the one that took place in Shkoder.

The party's deputy chairman, Genc Pollo, denies advocating violence and says Democrats will eventually sit in Parliament.

"We are afraid we will be used as a decoration," he said. "We don't want to provide an atmosphere that makes it seem like we have a normal democracy here."

With characteristic Albanian hyperbole, he added, "It is hard to work with people who tried to decapitate you."