

Albania's Political Landscape (1920–1924) through Mihal Gramenos' Perspective

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Abstract

Albania was a newly established country without a strong democratic base and political stability. Governments found it incredibly difficult to survive in the historical context of the time. In World War I, Albania was deployed on the front lines. The biggest challenges after the war were reestablishing the borders and developing a new form of government. Mihal Grameno (1871–1931), a significant nationalist figure in Albania, was deeply engaged in political and patriotic movements because of these conditions. As the editor of the Koha newspaper (1911–1926), Grameno made a significant contribution to Albanian literature and journalism.

This article will discuss the main political events that took place in Albania between 1920 and 1924, with a focus on political issues such as parliamentarism, governments, and political parties. Through a review of the literature, the political climate in Albania between 1920 and 1924 will be examined. We shall discuss Grameno's position on two significant politicians of the era, A. Zogu and F. Noli, at two distinct points in time. The first one is associated with his work as the newspaper editor of Koha, while the second one is associated with his writing of "Albanian Uprising" a few years later. By examining Grameno's corpus of work, this research contrasts "Albanian Uprising" with his earlier publications in Koha. We devised this point of view to accurately portray Grameno's mindset, which was shaped by the historical context.

Keywords: Albania, election, political party, M. Grameno, Albanian Uprising

INTRODUCTION

Wars have always determined the destiny of Albania and the Albanian people throughout the history of the Albanian state. The Albania of the first decade reflects a cohabitation gleaned from history in which political ideology of the Albanian National Renaissance, cultural norms, and patriarchal customs have not destroyed but rather coexisted. Since the Albanian state has consistently been dedicated to the protection of the national question, the country's path towards state growth has faced enormous hurdles. A nation, a state, or an individual struggling to survive may lose who they are. For a long time, the Extraordinary Powers' mentorship of Albania has been needed. The first crucial step towards the de jure recognition of the Albanian state and administration in the international arena was its membership in the League of Nations

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on December 17, 1920. With this decision, self-governance and the pledge to uphold international obligations were made clear. (Arben Puto 2009, 125)

Building a state and democratic institutions has been challenging given these prerequisites. 1920–24 were the only ones during which democratic customs and culture were developed. However, the country faced a series of political and territorial challenges in the following years. Various European powers, including Italy, Greece, and Serbia, looked to exert their influence over Albania, leading to territorial disputes and political instability. In 1920, the Lushnjë Congress set up a provisional government, aiming to stabilize the country. Ahmet Zogu appeared as a prominent political figure and later became Prime Minister. The Congress of Lushnjë laid the groundwork for the establishment of national institutions and affirmed Albania's territorial integrity.¹ (Pacukaj 2023) Even though the political conflict intensified in the following, these years are seen as a starting point for the parliamentary, legal, and democratic state structure, during which the Albanian state was able to create national institutions with complete self-government without outside assistance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Albanian state creation is a complicated topic that has been extensively studied. Several research papers have investigated the factors that influence state consolidation. Prior research on Albania found that historical, political, and socioeconomic issues all affect the formation and consolidation of the state. In 2011, the Center of Albanian Research published the book "100 Vjet Pavarësi/100 hundred Independence." The authors' contributions were noteworthy since they examined Albania's most crucial times, beginning with independence and afterwards. They studied how historical events including the Balkan Wars, World War I, the First Parliamentary Election, and political instability influenced state consolidation. Furthermore, they looked at socioeconomic aspects including economic reforms and social difficulties to better understand the complex nature of Albanian state construction. *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar (1912–2000)/History of the- Albanians (1912–2000)* offers valuable insights into some of the most pivotal periods in Albania's development as a nation. The book sheds light on formative events like Albania's Declaration of Independence in 1912 after centuries under Ottoman rule. It also investigates important junctures, such as foreign and domestic factors that affected the process of state formation. Throughout this significant book, researchers and learners will get an understanding of the historical backdrop of state consolidation, as well as the highs and lows of Albanian history across time.

To provide a fresh perspective on Albanian history without being engaged, we highlighted the facts and arguments of foreign authors such as Nina Smirnova. She has clearly depicted Albania's history using previously discovered material, mostly from Western and Russian archives, as well as new interpretations of the personalities, characters, events, and reality of the most violent century in Albanian history. Foreign writers Bern Fischer and Oliver Schmitt also present a brief history of Albania and its people within the Balkan and European contexts in their research. They examine the political, social, economic, and cultural developments that led to the establishment of the Albanian state and modern nation, focusing on Albanian relations with their Balkan neighbors.

Another significant source for our article is Thanas Gjika's monographic work "Mihal Grameno: jeta dhe vepra 1871-1931/ Mihal Grameno: life and work, 1871-1931," released in 2012. The book examines Mihal Grameno's multifaceted figure and is complemented with an index of names of people and places with whom Mihal Grameno has interacted throughout his life, as well as explanatory images. Finally, Mihal Gramenos' monumental book, "The Albanian Uprising," serves as the foundation for our article's consideration of facts and arguments. The text for this book was written in 1908, but due to the severe historical and political situations of the time, the author was unable to publish it. The book was released in 1925, and the cover states that it is dedicated to the President of the Republic of Albania, Ahmet Zog. (A.Kreka, et al. 2023) For contrast, articles from the daily "Koha," directed by Mihal Grameno, were also examined. In addition to Mihal Gramenos, the article examines Albania's political events from 1920 to 1924.

POLITICAL LIFE IN ALBANIA DURING 1920 - 1924

The reconstruction of the Albanian state in 1920, as well as the extension of its power over most of the land (based on the 1913 boundaries), reduced the importance of external international crises and shifted focus to domestic issues. The liberation of Vlora and the elimination of the Yugoslav incursion on Albania's north-eastern border produced favorable conditions for the country's internal peace. (Smirnova 2004, 109) In the country's political and social life, a new historical stage of democracy began. The most pressing issue was state-building and the creation of new legislation to replace Ottoman legislation. (Frashëri 2008, 258) The internal political struggle was accompanied by the resignation of Sulejman Delvina's cabinet, on November 14, 1920, the veiled political killings, and sharp differences among politicians at the time as well. (Smirnova 2004, 223) On November 19, 1920, Iliaz bey Vrioni formed a cabinet that included Xhafer Ypi and Mehdi Frashëri, among others. Their attitude on the most serious issues of the day wasn't surprising because the political status quo or the demands of major landowners were supported. According to V. Duka, Ahmet Zogu's absence from the cabinet influenced its role. As a result, there was an increasing sense of discontent and antagonism towards the new administration. Avoiding Ahmet Zogu's influence reduced the government's authority and control, particularly in the northern provinces, where he had a strong kinship base. (Duka 2007, 127) This allowed opposing factions and dissenting voices to buy popularity, posing a serious threat to the country's stability and unity. (Historisë 1984, 234)

Albania took its first moves toward statehood between 1920 and 1921. At that period, the state's constitutional institutions were set up and cemented. Some notable accomplishments included the first parliamentary elections, the formation of the first political parties, and their legislative engagement. These events led to the formation of a parliamentary opposition and the first writings on constitutional rights. Because of political disagreements in the National Council, an organization set up by the Congress of Lushnjë, it became essential to pass new election legislation, and the first parliamentary elections were held. (Mema 2013, 101) On December 5, 1920, the government adopted the first parliamentary election law in Albania's independent history. The elections would be held as they had been done previously, i.e., via indirect voting, with a second voter for every 500 people and one deputy for every 12 thousand people. Only men above the age of 20 who had lived in the electoral area for at least 6 months were eligible to vote. Second, electors must be at least 25 years old, while

representatives must be over 30. (Duka 2007, 136) Every citizen may compete for deputy, but the legislation barred those in poverty and women from taking part. The elector's name must be handwritten by the voters or a third person. Most of the people were illiterate, which allowed many voters' free will to be abused. (Smirnova 2004, 117) The National Council elections were held in February-March 1921 and finished on April 5, 1921. However, in Shkodër, elections were delayed by two months due to a confrontation between the clergy and the government over the number of Catholic representatives. On April 21, the first plenary session was held without Shkodra's deputies.

The formation of two parties from the first days of work was special to the 1921 Parliament. One of them came to be known as Popular, while the other was Progressive. The Popular Party was created by democratic and liberal components, with the goal of setting up a democratic constitution in Albania based on Western values. (Frashëri 2008, 259) Fan Noli and Ahmet Zogu were partially members of the party. While the Progressive Party developed as a reaction to the first and did not develop its own program, it was primarily composed of Muslim landowners and supporters of those who were interested in preserving their privileges and protecting them from any complications that the implementation of any agrarian reform might bring. Representatives of conservative Catholic circles who opposed secular education were also sympathetic to them. Despite having a parliamentary majority, the Progressive Party was unable to form a one-party administration due to public opposition. With Vrion's resignation as prime minister on October 11, 1921, certain members of the Popular Party and the Progressive Party created an alliance known as the "Holy Union." (Duka 2007, 120) The new cabinet was founded on October 19, 1921, under the leadership of P. Evangjeli, and A. Zogu as part of the cabinet. The official recognition of Albania's government by foreign countries strengthened its international status. Under these circumstances, Ahmet Zogu's authority was expanded, which was not well appreciated by High Council members, particularly Aqif Pashë Bicaku. The Supreme Council forced P. Evangjeli to resign when he refused to dismiss A. Zogu from his cabinet. After failed attempts to set up a cabinet with Prime Minister Qazim Koculi (who remained in power for 20 hours), the High Council was obliged to nominate H. Pristina as Prime Minister, replacing A. Zog with B. Curri as minister. However, A. Zog and his political followers were able to swiftly build a broad opposition to the administration, pushing H. Pristina to resign within a few days. Zogu returned to Tirana in December 1921, following a successful operation against an uprising in Mirdita village, to take leadership of the gendarmerie and restore order in the city. Tirana was besieged by his troops. Under these conditions, Parliament assembled suspended the Regency Council and elected new members. Zogu received approval to choose Xhafer Ypin as prime minister, and the Popular Party won the majority in Parliament. Zogu served as Minister of Internal Affairs, and Fan Noli was named Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The opposition wasn't content to limit itself to parliamentary battle; instead, it organized a violent uprising that did not overturn the government. Xhafer Ypi's cabinet was reformed; P. Evangjeli was named foreign minister, while Fan Noli resigned from the Popular Party. Zogu began a severe cleanup of the administrative machinery at the center and in the districts before being installed as prime minister in December 1922, when he delivered his maiden speech in Parliament. He vowed to organize Constituent Assembly elections in the fall of 1923 and enact new election legislation. (Duka 2007, 127) The political fight between the opposition and the

government increased in the fall of 1923, owing to the statute governing Constituent Assembly elections. The government's plan called for representatives to be elected indirectly, through second electors, rather than directly by the public; the opposition opposed it, insisting on a direct vote. Furthermore, given the significant percentage of the uneducated people, the opposition made additional demands: 1) voting should be done with ballots and not with cards; 2) elections should be held based on the basis of names and not by list; 3) women should be granted the right to vote; 4) the army and gendarmerie should be locked in the barracks on election day; and 5) participants in the March 1922 movement should be granted political amnesty. (Frashëri 2008, 262) The opposition's requests were not addressed in the scheme accepted on September 28, 1923. The election campaign began with the dissolution of Parliament. (Frashëri 2008) During the electoral campaign, government officials, particularly the gendarmerie, used violence and intimidation to persuade second-tier voters not to vote for the opposition list; the elections finished on December 27, 1923. Despite all the intimidation and falsifications, the government bloc won 40 seats in the Assembly out of 95, the opposition represented by F. Noli won 35 seats, and the 20 so-called independent deputies sided with the government bloc after the elections. (Smirnova 2004, 130) This limited outcome for democratic groups was caused using intimidation and a lack of focus on the people. Another aspect was the opposition's fragmentation into several organizations, as well as the absence of a unified and clear election agenda. Even after the Constitutional Assembly began its work in January 1924, A. Zogu's administration refused to quit. The opposition's extremist factions formed volunteer detachments in Dibër and Mat to remove the government by force. On February 23, 1924, Beqir Valteri, then 17, tried to assassinate A. Zog at the Parliament's entrance. Zogu resigned as prime minister and traveled overseas to undergo medical treatment. The Supreme Council demanded Shefqet Vërlac to organize the new administration, but his cabinet resigned swiftly. (Jacques 1996, 418) The opposition began to consider that constitutional measures were insufficient to alter the system; instead, vigorous action was needed. The murder of Avni Rustemi on April 20, 1924, worsened the situation. Following the funeral, opposition assembly members launched a military uprising under the leadership of a revolutionary commission commanded by Fan Nolin. Noli's rise to power was followed by a series of obstacles that lasted for the first six months of his administration. Despite the ambitious agenda and the effort to build parliamentary democracy, his political career was cut short, paving the way for Zog's ascent to prominence.

POLITICAL LIFE IN ALBANIA THROUGH MIHAL GRAMENO'S LENS

Grameno's lens provides two viewpoints on Albanian political life from 1920 to 1924. First, his works in the *Koha* newspaper reveal a democratic, critical, and dissident mentality that demands pluralism and parliamentarism for his nation. Meanwhile, during the Albanian Uprising, we heard about a new Grameno, whose works were not only rarely seen and lacking objective critique, but they had also lost their original opinion. According to new legislation for the choice of deputies in the National Council, the process of democratizing the country must be linked to state building. The ratification of the parliamentary election legislation (December 5, 1920) crowned the conviction of all democrats at the time that parliamentary elections would be used to democratize power, for which Grameno declared, "*Albania can never live again without being founded on a democratic life*". (Gjika 2011, 364) After the National Council

elections in April 1921, according to M. Grameno, the first plenary session was held in which the elected representatives took part. Grameno presents a bitter irony by saying that personnel with "Turkish mentality" arrived from Turkey between 1912 and 1913, while during 1920s, a factory was set up for their "production" in the country. According to him, political parties lacked a political program and competed only for personal power. The same Grameno may be found either in "Koha" newspaper or in "Albanian Uprising", where he refers to the present occurrences as "political spins," with Albanian politicians working behind the scenes to fulfill "selfishness and personal grudges, or rather for the Ministerial Thrones." (Gjika 2011) In his work "Ballmishllaret," he compares the young "Beylers" to the elderly. According to the articles he wrote in the Koha newspaper, young "Beylers" considered themselves as European-educated intellectuals who saw themselves as the country's hope. Literally he argues at Koha newspaper: *"at the time when Albania needed engineers, doctors, and teachers, the sons of Beylers graduated from political faculties in Europe, as if in Albania a cabinet would be formed in every village."* (Gjika 2011, 379) The events of 1921–1922 began to influence Grameno's conviction that the road to power should not always go through the parliament. In the "Albanian Uprisings," he wrote on Fan Noli: "Bishop Noli should have thrown himself into the religious field, to which he is devoted, and left the militant politics to the politicians who have thrown themselves into this war." In contrast, in his works, Koha displays admiration for his figure: "Only with Noli's fruitful mind can Albania progress." (Gjika 2011, 380)

The same attitude is reflected in describing A. Zogu as well. We have two contrasting perspectives on him while he was prime minister in '22. In the Albanian Uprising, he is described as "a young man with horizons, full of patriotic feelings, a rescuer from heaven," while in the Koha newspaper, he describes becoming prime minister as a "political machination of the Popular Party, which takes out one person and substitutes another." (Grameno 1924, 182) Grameno described the intensification of the electoral war in the fall of 1923 in nearly identical terminology in both the Albanian Uprising and the Koha newspaper. *"The opponents tried to gain the trust of the voters with programs that they had only seen in their dreams. I wonder when that day will come when the people know how to vote for themselves."* He continues: *"Envy, selfishness, and anger had blinded them more than the ignorance of why they had gathered, without regretting or being ashamed of all of the heavy burden and duty they had before the nation."* (Grameno 1924, 181) Following the elections of December 27, 1923, the political situation grew tense until the June Movement broke out. Considering these events, we lose cohesive Grameno because, throughout those years in Koha newspaper he supplied support to the qualitative change from a peaceful to an armed movement; he was even a member of the group's radical wing. In "Albanian Uprising" he uses a kind of hasher terminology when he says: "The political river took him away, losing all the sympathy gained over years, but, on the other hand, he created a great damage and destruction by organizing a fratricidal uprising from Vlora." (Grameno 1924, 184) If he considers Noli's takeover of power to be a win in Koha's articles, in Albanian Uprising book he promotes Zog's departure as a move to protect national peace in the Albanian Uprising, showing two different point of views in the dimension of time. At Koha newspaper, we can see a Grameno who suffers by the defeat of the June democratic movement. However, when Zog's rise to power, the newspaper Koha, along with Grameno, reversed their attitude and agreed with the government and new rulers. His works were few for personal and familial reasons, as well as due to the democratic movement's overall downfall. During the Zogist regime, his writings from 1915–1924 were unrevealed by

the current government, but not by democratic press bodies in the diaspora, which properly appreciated the personality and democratic journalist Grameno, leaving aside the last years, which as described by Noli, were a "a sick part of his life."

CONCLUSION

This article supplies a detailed description of Mihal Grameno's changing opinions and observations on Albanian political life at a pivotal period in Albania. The country saw significant political and social changes throughout the early 1920s, as the country won independence and recovered from World War I. The challenges that arose as a result highlighted Albania's quest for stability. The most significant step forward was to set up a parliamentary system and a democratic government. Mihal Grameno's view of Albanian political life from 1920 to 1924 reveals a democratic, critical, and dissident mindset. He advocated for pluralism and parliamentarism, thinking that parliamentary elections might be used to democratically distribute power. Throughout the article, there are varying opinions on significant personalities such as Fan Noli and Ahmet Zogu. Grameno's perspective differs between his articles in the "Koha" newspaper and the book "Albanian Uprising". This contradiction reflects Grameno's complex and growing connection with the political personalities of the time. While writing "Albanian Uprising," he loses his first critical and rebellious attitude. This transformation might have been affected by personal and familial factors and the collapse of the democratic movement. As a result, while assessing people such as Mihal Grameno, it is essential to keep a unique viewpoint and analyze both the highs and lows of his work. His contributions to our national history would be incomplete without the memoir book "Albanian Uprising," as well as all the essays, publications, and pamphlets published reflecting the Albanian national issues.

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