

Kosovo Has a Democracy, Now It Needs Democrats

By Shpetim Gashi

When you task a group of former insurgents and communists with building a democracy, you get Kosovo, an electoral democracy with a semi-autocratic leadership and monopolized market. Kosovo could be defined as a relatively successful electoral democracy—it held a few cycles of free and fair elections—but not as a liberal democracy, a political system marked not only by free and fair elections, but also by a free and fair market, rule of law, and separation of powers. The rule of law suffers from political interferences and control, and the market is neither free nor fair, monopolized by a handful of companies with strong political connections.

Kosovo's democracy is best defined in the words of Isa Mustafa, the head of the Democratic League of Kosovo, that "people don't choose a government, they only elect a parliament." For Mustafa and most of his other party colleagues, democracy more or less begins and ends with elections. Once the voting is over, people can go back to work, and the party leaderships alone decide who forms a governing coalition with whom, rarely taking into account their voter preferences and campaign promises. Party coalition agreements include not only the division of political positions but also of professional ones, such as prosecutors, judges, public company board members, public television director, privatization agency chief, and ambassadors.

Unlike in the United States where party leadership goes through a primary election, one member one vote, in Kosovo most party leaders are elected by party structures, which are easily controlled by the leaderships. In addition, in many cases, as in LDK's Mustafa, leaders are elected by acclamation, not a secret ballot. Those that do not raise their hands often have repercussions. The Self-Determination Movement has instituted a primary election for the party leaders, but Albin Kurti ran unchallenged in the first party's primary, making the race seem no more democratic than that of other parties.

The governing coalitions are based on personal relations and short-term interests of party leaders. The leaders' relations and their confidential agreements often replace legal procedures. LDK's Isa Mustafa brought down the governing coalition with Albin Kurti's VV because the latter dismissed a minister apparently in violation of a Mustafa-Kurti private agreement. Though the Constitution allows the prime minister to dismiss and appoint ministers, the Mustafa-Kurti agreement took precedence over the Constitution, showing that the traditional values such as 'deals between men' are sometimes stronger than democratic norms in Kosovo's nascent democracy. Subsequent attempts to save the coalition also failed largely because of traditional principle of revenge as described in the Code of Leke Dukagjini, an Albanian medieval set of guidelines, that if Albin Kurti brought down Isa Mustafa's minister, now Isa Mustafa has to bring down Albin Kurti's entire government to restore LDK's honor.

As a major component of the democratic system, political parties remain weak, unstable, and struggle with developing an internal policy debate and adequate democratic culture. There is little inter-party and intra-party dialogue and compromise. Most politicians are also not committed to a set of ideological beliefs, but rather to their short-term interests.

Just about a year ago, a group split from VV and entered into a pre-election coalition with AAK, its former political enemy.

Though they claim to represent liberal (left) or conservative (right) policies, the parties have no distinctive ideologies, resembling to what is known as ‘cartel’ parties, organizations run by self-interested power-seeking groups. Most Kosovo leaders seem to care or know little about ideology. They still associate ‘left’ with communism, while ‘right’ with patriotism. Just last week, a party leader said Albin Kurti’s ‘left’ ideology is pro-Slavic, a statement that best captures the understanding of ideology of most of Kosovo’s politicians. Consequently, apart from VV, they all claim to be ‘patriotic’ parties.

Though they have declared themselves conservatives, LDK, PDK, and AAK all support big governments and massive public spending. They support other left policies, such as universal healthcare and education, massive welfare programs, such as the war veterans program that claims about eight percent of Kosovo’s state budget. The Kosovo Serb parties and parties of other non-Albanian communities have so far dealt exclusively with their ethnic related issues.

Semi-autocratic party leaders and corrupt politics are shaping Kosovo’s democracy. The overwhelming majority of Kosovars know that the system is corrupt but feel helpless, very few believing they can do anything to change it. Many are frustrated that the pro-democracy forces are failing to defeat semi-autocrats not because of lacking public support and votes—a clear majority voted for younger, more democratic individuals from all parties in the November 2019 elections—but because the semi-autocrats manage to outmaneuver the young and more democratic ones time and time again. When everyone thought LDK’s old guard was going towards an irreversible retirement, its power suddenly resurrected.

The semi-autocrats may no longer control the voters and election outcomes, but they control the system and are committed to defend it at any cost. Ironically, they also enjoy the sympathy of Kosovo’s international backers. One could accurately conclude that the US ambassador in Germany Richard Grenell has a bigger say in the direction of Kosovo’s democracy than the about 800,000 Kosovo voters.

To paraphrase Tomas G. Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia, we have a democracy, what we now need is democrats.

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