

Albania: The Bullet of a Dying System

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In the early hours of 8th of December, in the Day of Youth, Albania awakened under the weight of tragic news, unbelievable at first but sadly anticipated. Since the lockdown restrictions, fines imposed on family members who were forced to go out to procure food and medicine, on workers returning home from work, on immigrants and homeless people whose quarantine space is the cold street, have become a daily reality.

The violent imposition of policemen towards youngsters in the peripheries, including beatings inside police cars and jails, has frequently prompted the reaction of running away from patrols. Thus appears the story of Klodian Rasha, the 25-year-old who was walking in his neighbourhood directed towards a shop. After the call by the police to stop, Klodian attempted to run, when out of nowhere and for no apparent reason, one of the policemen shot two bullets at him killing him instantly.

The personal details of the life of Klodian would be irrelevant in such a case; however, had Klodian not come from the lower ranks of the population, had he been the son of a member of parliament or a wealthy businessman, nothing of the above would have occurred.

A few months back, the Ministry of Interior announced that they planned to put on early retirement around 300 of the older generation of policemen, so as to replace them with younger newcomers in better physical condition, but lacking any experience in handling complex situations. Such was the case of the policeman who killed Klodian. A man in his early twenties who had joined the force only recently, and who had been immediately transferred to one of the most infamous police units: "The Eagles".

These are not coincidental circumstances, but the logical culmination of the use of police as a mechanism of violence. These youngsters are being taught that the state is the incarnation of absolute justice, and whoever disobeys its commandments is an enemy of the worst kind. Therefore, the responsibility for the killing of Klodian must not be restricted to the policeman who shot the weapon, but to the environment above that feeds such actions, of a power structure that has lost all legitimacy and resorts to violent means.

This was the message clearly embraced by the large mass of protestors who organized via social networks, independent of the old and crooked political parties. The revolt of the masses was augmented by the shameful attempt of the police to justify this act by claiming that Klodian was wielding a weapon by which he threatened the policemen, and later alluding that he had a criminal past, doubting in the end his mental health.

The discontent in regards to the police and their minister, Sandër Lleshaj, has been bubbling up for some time now. Actions such as the persecution of miners and oil refinery workers during their trade unionist organizations, the violent intervention towards the protesters defending the National Theatre from demolition, as well as against the student movement during the pandemic, have been engraved in the collective memory. Thus, on the 9th of December the protesters gathered outside the doors of the ministry to demand the resignation of the minister.

They were asking for justice for Klodian, but at the same time for all those executed in cold blood by the police in the last 30 years of neoliberalism in Albania. The four protesters killed on 21st of January by the Berisha government, come to mind. The only distinction left between the Rama and Berisha governments up until now had been the killing of innocent citizens. However perverse it may sound, this was one of the main arguments in the political discourse of the current government: at least we do not kill in the streets the way they did.

The political and economic model in Albania could be defined as an oligarchic order. Business people of a dark past own almost all the wealth of the country and use their economic power to manoeuvre like puppeteers all political parties, governmental and oppositional. They are responsible for the catastrophic conditions in which the public healthcare system finds itself. They are the big sharks who have benefited through the years from privatizations of the system and state subsidies for services that supposedly the public sector is incapable of providing. While new cases appear to overwhelm the system and death rate increases, Albania is the country with the lowest number of tests per population – 6 times lower than the average in Europe and 3 times lower than the average in the region. Meanwhile, the government imposes absurd measures that make no sense – on the one hand partial lockdowns and impositions of wearing masks on the streets, and on the other workers crammed together in tight mines, factories and call centres, turning them into nests of infection. And those responsible for enforcing these measures through penalties and terrorizing are the police.

The people understand this, and that is why the protest for the killing Klodian was called in absence of political parties and their acolytes. This protest refused the discredited political figures of 30 years, thus expressing people's frustration with the system and their will to create a new reality.

The protesters called for the police to remove their hats and join them, as an act of solidarity and distancing themselves from the killing of Klodian. Facing this possibility, the chiefs of police ordered the escalation of tension, pushing the protesters out of the ministry building. Even though the protesters up to that point had expressed their anger towards the building itself – not the policemen – this was reason enough for the repression of the revolt. This pushed the crowd in different directions: some towards the Prime Minister's building, others towards the Town Hall, all the while persecuted and arrested by men in civilian clothing. The Christmas tree was set alight, burning in flames under the falling rain – a scenery that best represented the rage and frustration that was brewing inside the protesters hearts.

The events described above cannot be understood in isolation from those preceding them. Since 21st of January, 2011, the hopes and beliefs in the old elites have been waning, even though for economic, ideological or be it cultural reasons, they have managed to maintain part of their electorate. During these years, through our activism, we have tried to contribute in the creation of new social movements from below, as an antithesis of the system controlled by the oligarchs, articulating the view that politics is not a monopoly of the bureaucrats sitting in parliament, but the realm of the common people who through organizing are able to take hold of their destinies. New independent trade unions have sprung up in Albania, new organizations against the subjugation of women, a student protest that in 2018 shook the foundations of the government; all these are signs that politics is drifting away from party headquarters towards the squares, workplaces, universities.

The protest against the killing of Klodian is another sign of the progressive potential that our society bears. In Albania, the old has died, and the new is organizing in order to be born.

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