

# **ALBANIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY AND ISLAM IN THE POST-COMMUNIST ERA**

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## **Introduction**

The Albanians were the last nation to develop their own nationalism in the Balkans, and the emergence of this Albanian nationalism was marked by the establishment in 1878 of the Prizren League. The League's main aim, which was initially supported by the Ottomans, was to protect the lands inhabited by the Albanians from the neighboring countries, but the League was later suppressed by the Ottomans themselves as soon as it began to challenge Ottoman authority in the area. The conflict between the Albanians and the Ottomans was to continue until the Balkan Wars. The majority of the Muslim Albanians, who enjoyed traditional rights within the Ottoman Empire, were in favor of the status quo as long as the Ottomans could sustain their hold in the Balkans. However, in time, the radical Albanians, who favored a linguistic and cultural rather than a religious unity, were to gain the upper hand.<sup>2</sup>

The tribal structure and religious division of Albanian society are two important factors contributing to the delay in the development of Albanian nationalism. The Albanians are divided into two different subgroups: Gëgs and Tosks. The Tosks live in southern Albania and northern Greece, while the Gëgs are to be found in the northern part of

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans. Twentieth Century*, vol. 2, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 86.

Albania. The Shkumbin river in central Albania serves as a natural barrier between the two tribes. The overwhelming majority of the Albanians in Kosovo, Montenegro and western Macedonia are also Glegs. Geg society in Albania was traditionally based on a tribal structure, but the communist regime in Albania tried to integrate the two tribes and the terms Geg and Tosk disappeared from the political vocabulary.<sup>3</sup> In time, the tribal structure in northern Albania largely disappeared, while the Glegs of the former Yugoslavia have preserved some elements of their patriarchal culture to the present day. Glegs and Tosks have alternated in power in Albania. In the inter-war period, under the rule of Zogu, the Glegs dominated Albanian politics, while the Tosks constituted the basis of the communist regime of Enver Hoxha after the Second World War.

The religious diversity of Albanian society is another factor that delayed the development of Albanian nationalism. Approximately 70 percent of the population of Albania is Muslim, 20 percent Orthodox and 10 percent Catholic while the Albanians in Kosovo and Macedonia are largely Muslims.<sup>4</sup> Although the religious division of Albanian society could not obstruct the national union of the Albanians it prevented the Islamic religion from becoming a unifying factor. Albanian culture, the feeling of common kinship and, particularly, the Albanian language became the central elements of Albanian nationalism.<sup>5</sup> This fact, however, should not lead one to disregard the role of religion in different Albanian societies and additional factors other than the religious

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<sup>3</sup>Elez Biberaj, *Albania in Transition. The Rocky Road to Democracy*, Boulder: Westview Press, 1998, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup>In Albania, the Muslims, the largest group, are composed of two different subgroups: the Bektashis and the Sunnis. The Sunnis constitute 55 percent of the total population, while the Bektashis are estimated to make up 15 percent. The last religious statistics of Albania date from 1942. Nathalie Clayer, "Islam, State and Society in Post-Communist Albania," in Hugh Poulton, Suha Taji- Farouki, (eds.), *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, London: Hurst&Company, 1997, p. 118.

<sup>5</sup> Stavro Skendi, *The Albanian National Awakening 1878-1912*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967, p. 469.

diversity of the Albanian society governing the relation between religion and Albanian nationalism. The following article focuses on the effects of the political frameworks and international developments on the relation between Islam and Albanian nationalism in different Albanian societies.

### **Albania**

Albania was the last country to be affected by the political changes in the former communist bloc countries after 1989, but the developments in Bulgaria and Romania made the introduction of a multi-party system in Albania inevitable.<sup>6</sup> The Democratic Party (DP), established in 1990, became the main opposition party in Albania. On the other hand, the Albanian Party of Labour (APL) was renamed the Socialist Party of Albania (SPA) at its tenth party congress in 1991 and Fatos Nano, a moderate communist, became its new leader. Although the SPA did well in the elections of 1991 and formed the basis of a new government, the elections of 1992 were won by the DP led by Sali Berisha and supported by the Sunni leaders, mainly because of its strongly anti-communist stance.<sup>7</sup> During the elections in the post-communist period the DP found greater support in the north and the SPA in the south, but the political differences between the rural and urban areas appeared to be stronger than the north-south divide.

The mainstream Albanian political forces seem to have acted judiciously in preventing the simmering Geg-Tosk resentment from coming to the surface.<sup>8</sup>

The DP of Berisha generally favors the rehabilitation of Muslim identity in order to win over the support of large segments of the population (particularly the inhabitants of north-eastern Albania) that were marginalized under communist rule.<sup>9</sup> Albanian foreign policy underwent radical changes in the 1990s under the DP and SPA. Albania had

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<sup>6</sup> The riots of 1990 that took place in this transitional period were not Islamic in character.

<sup>7</sup> Clayer, *op. cit.*, pp. 130, 131.

<sup>8</sup> Biberaj, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

signed a framework-treaty with the Islamic Development Bank as early as 1991. During DP rule, Albania became a member of the OIC (Organization of Islamic Countries). Albanian membership of the OIC and the participation of Sali Berisha and the former foreign minister Alfred Serreqi in the summit conference of the OIC in Jiddah (Saudi Arabia) led to a political rift between the government and the opposition. The socialists argued that Albanian membership of the OIC was a violation of the constitution and an attempt to divert Albania from its Euro-Atlantic orientation.<sup>10</sup>

After DP rule from 1992 to 1997, the socialists came to power in Albania following the elections of June 1997.<sup>11</sup> The new government severed relations with the Islamic world and Albania did not attend the summit conference of the OIC in Teheran in December 1997. However, the socialists still tried to maintain cooperation with the Islamic Development Bank in the hope of obtaining credits. Fatos Nano declared that Albania would consider only bilateral relations with the Islamic countries,<sup>12</sup> though some politicians from the south, as well as some clans from the north, such as the Tropoja and Diber, who had representatives in the DP, favoured the strengthening of relations with the Islamic countries.<sup>13</sup> However, the then prime minister, Fatos Nano, who came from an Orthodox background, along with some other leading socialist politicians, favored close relations with Greece and Yugoslavia. On the other hand, the socialists launched a campaign against Islamic fundamentalism implicitly or explicitly associated with DP rule. The socialist government tried to dismantle the pro-DP political and religious

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<sup>9</sup> Nathalie Clayer, *Religion et nation chez les Albanais. XIXe-XXe Siècles*, Istanbul: Les Editions Isis, 2002, p. 377.

<sup>10</sup> The State of Albania. ICG Balkans Report Nr. 54, 06 January 1999, p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> The Democratic Party had won the elections of 1996, but the riots in southern Albania after the collapse of the financial pyramid schemes forced the Albanian government to hold new elections in 1997.

<sup>12</sup> The State of Albania. ICG Balkans Report Nr. 54, 6 January 1999, p.6.

<sup>13</sup> Stephan Lipsius, "Politik und Islam in Albanien-Instrumentalisierung und Abhängigkeiten," *Südosteuropa*, 3-4 (1998), p. 130.

networks in Albania, and elements within the Islamic community close to the DP were replaced by young Albanian officials.<sup>14</sup>

The Islamic Community<sup>15</sup>, founded in February 1991, publishes a monthly paper “Drita Islame”. According to the official statute (chapter 1, article 1), the Community includes all the sects compatible with the basic principles of the Islamic religion.<sup>16</sup> The main problem faced by the Sunni Muslim Community has been to remobilize the population after fifty years of communist rule.<sup>17</sup> In the early 1990s, the various religious Communities, including the Muslim Community, were in desperate need of clergymen. Although steps have been taken to improve this situation it seems that the problem will continue for some time. The revival of religious life manifested itself basically in the restoration of old mosques and the construction of new ones.<sup>18</sup>

The Sixth World Bektashi Congress, convened in Tirana in 1993, was an important step in the reorganization of the Albanian Bektashi Community<sup>19</sup> with Bektashi leaders who insisted on independence vis-a-vis their Sunni counterparts. Though both of the Communities have serious financial difficulties, the situation of the Bektashis is worse than that of the Sunnis insofar as they are not in receipt of any substantial support from abroad. The other old dervish orders of Albania, the Rifais<sup>20</sup>, the Qadiris, the Saadis and Tidjanis would appear to be less vigorous.<sup>21</sup> There is competition between these dervish orders and the Bektashis, who try to monopolize mystical life in Albania.<sup>22</sup>

During DP rule, the Bektashis had no privileged links with the highest political authorities. There was also competition between the two rival groups within the

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<sup>14</sup> Clayer, *Religion et nation*, op. cit., p. 415.

<sup>15</sup> Community (with a capital) is used for the religious organizations.

<sup>16</sup> Gyorgy Lederer, “Islam in Albania,” *Central Asian Survey*, 3 (1994), p. 352.

<sup>17</sup> Clayer, “Islam, State and Society,” op. cit., p. 123.

<sup>18</sup> Wilma Löhner, “Religiose Kultur in Albanien,” in Hans-Dieter Döpmann, (ed.), *Religion und Gesellschaft in Südosteuropa*, München: Südosteuropa- Gesellschaft, 1997, p. 177.

<sup>19</sup> Clayer, “Islam, State and Society,” op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>20</sup> The Rifa’iyya is the most active of the Sufi orders.

<sup>21</sup> Lederer, op. cit., p. 354.

Bektashi Community. The group around Baba Reshat Bardhi, head of the Community, favoured the independent status of the Community, while the other group, around Baba Selim, the head of the tekke Fushë-Krujë, which was close to the DP, was against it. The DP enjoys the support of small Bektashi groups such as in Lazarat. Since the coming of the socialists to power the Bektashi Community has been trying to transform itself on a national and international level. The leading group around Baba Reshat is trying to promote Bektashism as a worldwide movement with its center in Albania. To this end, they have developed their ties with some foreign organizations.<sup>23</sup> This group is being accused by the rival group of trying to turn Bektashism into a pro-orthodox, semi-religious brotherhood. The new status of the Bektashi Community was accepted during the 7th Bektashi Congress held in Tirana in 2000.<sup>24</sup>

Although some observers<sup>25</sup> think that the Albanians seemed to have lost any belief in organized religion during the long communist rule of Enver Hoxha, several statistics show that religion is still an important social factor in Albania.<sup>26</sup> A relatively greater continuity of Muslim traditions seems to exist in the countryside,<sup>27</sup> and in the 1990s important population movements took place from rural and mountainous areas to the cities in central Albania such as Tirana and Durrës, and from Albania to Greece, Italy and some other countries. In Tirana, where the population more than doubled in ten years, the newcomers, who stem mainly from north-eastern Albania (a Sunni Muslim area), are regarded by the city-dwellers as conservative.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, in the post-communist period, Albania has been exposed to intensive missionary activities,

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<sup>22</sup> Clayer, *Religion et nation*, op. cit., p. 411.

<sup>23</sup> These organizations included the Haji Bektash Research Institute of Ankara University and some Shiite oriented Iranian organizations. Clayer, *Religion et nation*, op. cit., p. 418.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 416-418.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Gyorgy Lederer, *Islam in East Europe*, Central Asian Survey, 1 (2001), p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Clayer, *Religion et nation*, op. cit., p. 403.

<sup>27</sup> Frances Trix, *The Resurfacing of Islam in Albania*, *East European Quarterly*, 4 (1994), pp. 533-550.

<sup>28</sup> Clayer, *Religion et nation*, op. cit., pp. 376-377, 431.

and Arab proselytizers have found themselves in competition with many ambitious Christian and Western missionaries. The fact that most of the converts are from the Muslim community is a cause for concern to the Muslim leadership.<sup>29</sup>

Pope John Paul II remarked during his visit in 1993 that Albania remained a model of religious co-existence.<sup>30</sup> Although there are some small Islamist groups active in Albania they are not an important factor in the political life of the country. Moreover, their influence was further reduced by the establishment of socialist governments. Terrorism and the claims of Islamic fundamentalism are rejected by DP members<sup>31</sup> and the Islamic Community as a whole,<sup>32</sup> while the majority of the Muslim clergy are traditionally in favor of peaceful co-existence with other Albanians of different religious backgrounds.<sup>33</sup> This multi-religious tolerance in Albania can also be partly attributed to the common suffering of all religious groups under the communist dictatorship.<sup>34</sup>

However, the post-communist period witnessed some public political conflicts between Albanian intellectuals over Albanian religious and national identity.<sup>35</sup> Kiço Blushi argued that religious division had, throughout history, prevented the achievement of national unity in Albania, while Abdi Baleta<sup>36</sup> claimed that Albania owed its success in surviving all attempts at foreign assimilation to its multi-confessional character. Ismail Kadare, the prominent Albanian writer, claimed that the conversion of the Albanians

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<sup>29</sup> Tonin Gjuraj, *A Stable Ecumenical Model? How Religion Might Become a Political Issue in Albania*, *East European Quarterly*, 1 (2000), p. 21-40.

<sup>30</sup> Biberaj, *op. cit.*, p. 210

<sup>31</sup> Lipsius, *op. cit.*, pp. 128- 134.

<sup>32</sup> See for example "Zhurma e shtypit mbi terroristet islamike," *Drita Islame*, 16 (147) (1998), p.1; "T'i ruhemi edhe fundamentalizmit laik!," *Drita islame* 15 (146) (1998), p.1.

<sup>33</sup> See for example Trix, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Hugh Poulton, "Islam, Ethnicity and State in the Contemporary Balkans," in Hugh Poulton, Suha Taji-Farouki, (eds.), *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, London: Hurst & Company, 1997, p. 24. For religion in communist Albania see James S. O'Donnell, *A Coming of Age. Albania under Enver Hoxha*, Boulder: East European Monographs, 1999, pp. 137-144.

<sup>35</sup> In fact, in Albania, as early as the last years of the communist regime, there were some attempts to relate Islam to Albanian national identity, even though these ideas were exported from Kosovo. Clayer, *Religion et nation*, *op. cit.*, pp. 368-369.

would facilitate the integration of Albania into the European Union, and the newspaper of the leftist Democratic Alliance urged Muslim Albanians to convert to Christianity.

Neshat Tozaj called for a new census to be held to find out the true religious composition of Albania but Baleta and some others denounced those in favour of the conversion of the Muslims and expressed concern about the politicization of religion.<sup>37</sup>

Post-communist Albania has also witnessed serious competition between the different religions. Islam, particularly Sunni Islam, seems to be on the defensive. This trend, which had emerged in the inter-war period, was accelerated by the communist regime. During communist rule, the traditional power structure of the country, which was based mainly on the Muslims, was destroyed, and the communist elite came mainly from among the Orthodox and Bektashis of the southern part of Albania. On the other hand, Marxist rule erased Islamic culture more than the other religious cultures and today the Christians enjoy a higher social status than the Muslims.<sup>38</sup>

In Albania, 30 per cent of the population is Christian by birth and there is no direct confrontation with non-Albanian elements. Thus, the amalgamation of religious with ethnic and national identities is not an argument that can be as readily applied in Albania as in Kosovo and Macedonia, where the mainly Muslim Albanians are confronted by the Orthodox Slavs. Although some Muslim leaders in Albania favor such an amalgamation in order to legitimize the role of Islam in the newly democratic republic,<sup>39</sup> the representatives of the Muslim Communities do not question the secular structure of the Albanian state.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Abdi Baleta, the former member of DP, formed the Party of National Restoration. This party and its newspaper "Rimekembja Kombetare" has been considered the main source of the political right in Albania.

<sup>37</sup> For these polemics see Biberaj, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

<sup>38</sup> Clayer, *Religion et nation*, *op. cit.*, pp. 432, 402.

<sup>39</sup> Clayer, "Islam, State and Society," *op. cit.*, p. 136.

<sup>40</sup> Nathalie Clayer, "National and Religious Identity among Albanian Muslims after the Political Upheaval of 1990," *Islamic Studies*, 36 (1997), p. 405.

## **Kosovo and Macedonia**

The new Serbian constitution adopted on 28 September 1990 abolished the autonomy that had been granted to Kosovo by the 1974 Constitution of Socialist Yugoslavia. However, in October 1991, the newly established “Assembly of the Kosovo Republic” declared the independence of the Kosovo Republic, a step that had already been approved by the great majority of the Kosovars in a referendum. Albania was the first and only state to recognize the Kosovo Republic. Bujor Bukoshi formed a provisional government in exile and in the elections of 24 May 1992 Ibrahim Rugova, the leader of the “Democratic League of Kosovo” (LDK), was elected president of the Kosovo Republic. His party became the largest party in Kosovo, taking 76% of the vote.

Although there had been a strong Serbian military build-up in Kosovo, particularly after 1992, during this period the Albanians succeeded in creating a parallel state with its own parliament, government and president, and the parallel education system, the so called -arsimi parallel (*it means parallel education in Albanian*), which started in private houses, became the symbol of Albanian nationhood. In 1994 a unified curriculum was introduced in Kosovo and Albania for some subjects in primary and secondary schools, and this was followed by the publication of joint textbooks for Albanian and Kosovo schools. This represented the cultural integration of Kosovo with Albania, which was the dream of many Albanians. In this new era, the national goals shaped the curricula of the schools in the parallel education system and the secular vision of nationhood prevailed.<sup>41</sup>

Ibrahim Rugova tried to resist Serbian pressure by peaceful means. Under his leadership the Albanians hoped to establish an independent Kosovo Republic with the diplomatic

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<sup>41</sup> Stephanie Schwandner-Sievens and Bernd J. Fischer, *Albanian Identities. Myth and History*, London: Hurst&Company, 2002, pp. 166-171.

support and protection of the western countries and international organizations, but discontent increased among the Albanians when his policy was found to have brought no improvement in Kosovo. On the other hand, the signing of the Dayton Accord in 1995, which brought the Bosnian War to an end, was another factor which contributed to the increasing Albanian resistance in Kosovo. The Kosovo Albanians felt that in Dayton, in which no mention was made of the situation in Kosovo, they had been forgotten by the international community.<sup>42</sup> As a result, the Kosovo Liberation Army (UÇK), a military organization founded by the Kosovo Albanians, gained more and more support, finally engaging in open clashes with the Serbian armed forces. Islam was not, however, an important factor in Albanian armed resistance to the Orthodox Serbs.<sup>43</sup>

The Serbian nationalist leaders and the Serbian media were convinced that it was essential that an Albanian opposition movement like the Bosnian Islamic jihad (holy war) should be suppressed in order to stop further Islamic penetration into Europe. By promoting this thesis the Serbs hoped to win the support of the Europeans and to justify their suppression of the movement in Kosovo. Although Islam in a non-fundamentalist form played a role in the political awakening of the Muslims, its political role in Kosovo was so slight as to be more or less negligible. Moreover, the Bosnian and Kosovar political movements had very little contact with each other.<sup>44</sup>

It was not until 1990 that the Albanian cause in Kosovo was supported by the official Islamic hierarchy in Bosnia. In a conference organized by the Meshihat (Islamic

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<sup>42</sup> Leo Tindemans, *Unfinished Peace. Report of the International Commission on the Balkans*, Berlin: Aspen Institute, 1996, p. 117; See also Shinasi A. Rama, "The Serb-Albanian War, and the International Community's Miscalculations," *The International Journal of Albanian Studies*, 1 (1998), pp. 15-19.

<sup>43</sup> For a critical assessment of the infiltration of fundamentalist activities into Kosovo see Religion in Kosovo. ICG Reports Nr. 105 (Pristina /Brussels), pp. 5, 6.

<sup>44</sup> Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo. A Short History*, London: Macmillan, 1998, p. 351.

Community) of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Sarajevo under the title “Religion and Conflict in Kosovo”, stress was laid on the fact that the conflict in Kosovo was not a religious one.<sup>45</sup> Thus, responsibility for the situation in Kosovo was firmly laid on the Serbian side. The religious leader of the Muslim Albanians in Kosovo also considered the Albanian movement during the Serbian suppression as possessing less of a religious than a nationalist character, though he tended to imply the existence of a certain connection between national and religious identity.<sup>46</sup>

For the Albanians who could not participate directly in the political arena because of the extremely tense political situation that existed before the NATO operations, action in the religious field had become a substitute for political activity.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, the increasing discontent with the strategy of Rugova forced the LDK, which had become weaker in relation to the UÇK, to establish some alliances with the religious authorities, and to stress the role of the Islamic Community in the social and political life of Kosovo. Similarly, the UÇK also seems to have tried to get the support of some Islamic networks, particularly abroad.<sup>48</sup> In the face of large-scale atrocities carried out by the Serbian forces in 1999, the resistance movement of the Kosovar Albanians turned into an outright national struggle for the physical survival and self-determination of the Kosovar Albanians, regardless of their social and religious backgrounds.<sup>49</sup> The activities of the UÇK came to be seen also by the circles related to the Islamic Community as a self-defensive jihad.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> “Razgovor sa direktorom Medrese u Pristini Resulom Rexhepijem. Hvala islamskoj zajednici u Sarajevu,” *Preporod* 2/489 (1991), p. 8.

<sup>46</sup> Clayer, “National and Religious Identity,” *op. cit.*, p. 408.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>48</sup> Nathalie Clayer, “L’ Islam, facteur des recompositions internes en Macédoine et au Kosovo,” in Xavier Bougarel, Nathalie Clayer (eds.), *Le Nouvel Islam Balkanique*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001, p. 235.

<sup>49</sup> Aydın Babuna, “The Albanians of Kosovo and Macedonia: Ethnic Identity Superseding Religion,” *Nationalities Papers*, 1(2000), p. 79.

<sup>50</sup> Clayer, “L’ Islam,” *op. cit.*, p. 236.

The increasing intensity of the clashes between the Albanians and the Serbs drew the attention of the international community to Kosovo. The failure of the negotiations between the Serbs and Albanians on the future of Kosovo in Rambouillet in February 1999 led to NATO military attacks on Serbian targets. This was followed by the establishment of the United Nations administration in Kosovo based on resolution 1244 of the Security Council of the United Nations. In May 2001, the Constitutional Framework for Provisional Self-Government in Kosovo was proclaimed. The newly established Albanian political parties in Kosovo have secular programs and none of them has challenged the secular structure of the constitutional framework of the interim government of Kosovo.<sup>51</sup>

However, the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), which has focused on conflict-resolution, together with the secular non-governmental organizations in Kosovo, seems to have failed to address local needs. This void was filled by the faith-based charity organizations. The organizations operating under the umbrella of SJCRKC (The Saudi Joint Committee for the Relief of Kosovo and Chechnya) seem to have monopolized food and health supply distribution to the population and education in rural Kosovo.<sup>52</sup> This Wahhabi-Salafi<sup>53</sup> penetration, with its anti-Western rhetoric, contributes to the traditional rural-urban division of Kosovo and also may be a destabilizing factor for harmony among the Albanians of different religious backgrounds in the long run, although, so far, only a small segment of society

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<sup>51</sup> The three largest Albanian political parties, The Democratic League of Kosovo, The Democratic Party of Kosovo and the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo participated in the negotiations on the Constitutional Framework for Provisional Self-Government in Kosovo through their constitutional experts. For the different positions of the Albanian political parties on this issue see Arben Hajrullahu, Michaela Salamun, "Der Verfassungsrahmen für die provisorische Selbstverwaltung in Kosova," *Südosteuropa*, 1-3 (2002), pp.125-128.

<sup>52</sup> For the activities of these charity organizations in rural Kosovo see Isa Blumi, "The Islamist Challenge in Kosova," *Current History*, 662 (2003), pp. 124-128.

<sup>53</sup> The Salafi favor the pure method of Islamic practice.

has accepted Salafi doctrines.<sup>54</sup> The Kosovar Albanians are largely Sunni Muslims and differ markedly from the Bosnian Muslims insofar as the Sufi orders, which are mainly concentrated in the underdeveloped and densely populated south-western part of Kosovo, play an important role in religious life.<sup>55</sup> There are also Catholic Albanians living in Kosovo<sup>56</sup> but there is no hostility between Albanians of the Muslim and Catholic faiths, and relations between them have consistently been described as good.<sup>57</sup> For many years, the Catholic Church has been organizing services for the reconciliation of vendettas, and these services have been attended by thousands of Muslim and Catholic Albanians.<sup>58</sup> The Catholics supported the Sunni Muslims in their resistance to Serbian repression, while the Catholic Church organized services for those who were killed by the Serbian forces. However, the low number of mixed marriages between Muslim and Catholic Albanians shows that religion still plays a certain role in the social life of Kosovo.<sup>59</sup>

In the 1980s, there were basically two trends among the Albanian intellectuals in the Balkans concerning the role of Islam in the Albanian national identity. The first is the so-called occidentalism which rejects Islam and Islamic identity as incompatible with European culture, and the other is multi-confessionalism, which favors the subordination of religious to national identity.<sup>60</sup> Since 1989-90 two new trends have emerged: the rehabilitation of the Muslim identity by stressing its role in the Albanian

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<sup>54</sup> Blumi, op. cit., p. 126. For example: "Takvimi", the Journal of the Islamic Community of Kosovo" (bashkesia islame e Kosoves) occasionally discusses the need for an Islamic party in Kosovo to deal with the problems of rural poverty and administrative neglect. Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> This part of Kosovo includes the towns of Prizren, Rahovec (Orahovac), Peja (Pec) and Gjakova (Djakovica). Ger Duijzings, *Religion and the Politics of Identity in Kosovo*, London: Hurst & Company, 2000, p. 115.

<sup>56</sup> Catholics numbered between 50-60.000 before the NATO operations in Kosovo.

<sup>57</sup> Probably with the encouragement of Rugova, the Muslim Kosovars began to attend church en masse for the Easter and Christmas services. Clayer, *Religion et nation*, op. cit., p. 378.

<sup>58</sup> Josef Bata, "Das Verhältnis von Christentum und Islam bei den Albanern in Geschichte und Gegenwart," in Hans Dieter Döpmann, (ed.), *Religion und Gesellschaft*, München: Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft, 1997, p. 162.

<sup>59</sup> Duijzings, op. cit., p. 161.

national identity ( a kind of Albanian-Islam synthesis), and the rehabilitation of Muslim identity along with the Islamic religion. There are also many variants and combinations of these four main trends. The leaders of the Albanian nationalist movement in Kosovo, as well as the socialists and other left wing political groups in Albania, are close to the occidentalist and pluri-confessionalist ideas while the right-wing political parties in Albania (particularly Abdi Baleta's National Restoration party) are inclined to favor an Islamic-Albanian synthesis. Although an important part of the Albanian elite in Kosovo (and, to a lesser extent, in Macedonia) tends to reject Muslim identity, most of the promoters of the views stressing the relation between Islam and the Albanian identity are from Kosovo. The old conflict between the largely Muslim Albanians and the Orthodox Serbs in Kosovo seems to be the main reason for this.<sup>61</sup>

One of the most important differences between the Albanians of Macedonia and the Kosovar Albanians in the 1990s lay in their political attitudes. The Albanians of Macedonia had participated in the political life of the country ever since it gained its independence on 21 November 1991, while the Kosovar Albanians established a parallel state in opposition to the Serbian authorities.<sup>62</sup> The Albanian political party, the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP), joined the coalition governments between 1992 and 1998, and another Albanian party, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), participated in the coalition government established after the elections of 1998 along with the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization-Democratic Party of Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) and the Democratic Alternative (DA). Finally, both of the Albanian parties were to join the grand coalition established after the clashes between the Albanian guerillas and the Macedonian forces in 2001. In contrast to the Kosovar Albanians, the Albanians of Macedonia have no tradition of

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<sup>60</sup> The occidentalist group includes the celebrated Albanian writer Ismail Kadare.

autonomy. Furthermore, the Albanians of Macedonia live mainly in an ethnically mixed society, though in some provinces of western Macedonia they make up the majority or a large proportion of the population.<sup>63</sup>

The Macedonian Albanians are considered in Albania to be a fairly religious people.<sup>64</sup> The most devout of these Muslims are the Albanians of western Macedonia (particularly the Tetova, Gostivar region), where more elements of traditional culture have been preserved.<sup>65</sup> However, the major Albanian parties in Macedonia have secular programs and nationalistic aims<sup>66</sup> and they have never questioned the secular structure of the Macedonian state. On the other hand, the leaders of the Islamic Community in Macedonia do not forget the fact that Macedonia is a secular country.<sup>67</sup> The fusion of national and religious identities which appears quite often in Macedonia seems to be a reaction of the Muslim Albanian minority to the Orthodox Macedonian majority under the existing political and social conditions.<sup>68</sup>

Since communist rule, the Macedonian authorities have suspected the Albanians of attempting to assimilate the smaller Muslim minorities in the country through Islam and have supported the rival Muslim religious Communities against the main Muslim religious organization, Meshihat (Islamic Community.) In the 1990s, the Islamic Community was close to the PDP, particularly through the links of its leader, Süleyman Rexhepi, with this party. This attitude of the Islamic Community was criticized by the

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<sup>61</sup> Clayer, *Religion et nation*, op. cit., pp. 372-380, see also Clayer, "L' Islam," op. cit., pp. 228-238.

<sup>62</sup> Babuna, op. cit., pp. 81-82.

<sup>63</sup> The Albanians constitute an absolute majority of the population in some provinces like Tetovo (74.4%), and Gostivar (63.7%) and a relative majority in provinces like Kicevo (49.2%), Struga (45.2%), and Debar (44.4%).

<sup>64</sup> Miranda Vickers, James Pettifer, *Albania. From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, New York: New York University Press, 1997, p.178.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Elsie, *A Dictionary of Albanian Religion, Mythology, and Folk Culture*, London: Hurst & Company, 2001, p. 124.

<sup>66</sup> There are also some small parties in Macedonia, such as the SDA (Bosnian Muslim Party for Democratic Action), which stress Islamic brotherhood.

<sup>67</sup> Simply because it is a multinational and multi-religious state. See Clayer, "National and Religious Identity," op. cit., p. 405.

rival Albanian party, DPA. However, the DPA has also used Islam from time to time to win over the support of the Albanian voters. The humanitarian organization “el-Hilal” plays an important role in the relations between Islam and politics in Macedonia. Through this organization, the Islamic Community is linked to different Islamic networks such as the Islamic Bank of Development. The Islamic Community is actively supporting the Albanian national cause through its activities and publications.<sup>69</sup>

A survey made by the Centre for Ethnic Relations in March 1993 shows that religion had become a new factor in the relations between the two ethnic groups in Macedonia.

In contrast to the results of the previous studies, it was the first time that the Macedonian population had shown any real sectarian prejudice, but this sudden and drastic change within a year, combined with some other data, points to the fact that the Macedonians considered Orthodoxy as part of their national identity rather than as a purely religious belief.<sup>70</sup>

The Albanians of Macedonia, who regard themselves as having been placed in the position of second-class citizens because of their ethnic and religious identity,<sup>71</sup> demanded in the 1990s that the Albanian community living in Macedonia should be given partner-nation status. This became the main aim of all Albanian political parties and groups, though they disagreed on the tactics required to achieve it. For the Albanians, partner-nation status means joint decision-making with the Macedonians at

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 407.

<sup>69</sup> Clayer, “L’ Islam,” op. cit., pp. 199-204.

<sup>70</sup>“ According to the results of this survey of the two population groups, some 30 % of the Orthodox population was devout while the proportion among the Muslims was thought to be somewhat higher, but the negative attitudes of the two communities towards members of the other faith appeared to have increased. More than 70 % of both communities were against marriages with persons of different confessions while just over 45 % favoured ethnically homogeneous marriages. Similar trends could be observed in the choice of neighbours, colleagues, and friends”. Mirjana Najcevska, Emilija Simoska, Natasha Gaber, “Muslims, State and Society in the Republic of Macedonia: The View from Within,” in Gerd Nonneman, Tim Niblock , Bogdan Szajkowski, (eds.), *Muslim Communities in the New Europe*, Lebanon: Ithaca Press, 1996, pp. 91-96, cited in Babuna, op. cit., pp. 84, 91.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

both state and local levels. It also entails the proportional representation of the Albanians in important state institutions, and rights such as the use of the Albanian language in official forums, the public use of the Albanian flag and the furtherance of education in the Albanian language.<sup>72</sup>

It did not take long for the developments in Kosovo to spread to Macedonia, and in the spring of 2001 the National Liberation Army of the Albanians engaged in armed conflicts with the Macedonian security forces. On August 13, 2002, after heavy fighting that claimed hundreds of lives, both sides signed the Ohrid agreement imposed by Nato and the European Union. The Ohrid Agreement comprised far-reaching constitutional and political reforms that improved the rights of the Albanian minority in Macedonia in spite of the non-acceptance of their partner-nation status. The new Macedonian constitution, which stresses the civil character of the Macedonian state, allows the use of the Albanian language at local level in municipalities where Albanians comprise at least 20 per cent of the population. The same constitution envisages the proportional representation of the ethnic minorities in public administration and the increased voting capacity of the ethnic minorities in Parliament.<sup>73</sup>

The relations between the Islamic Community of Macedonia and the Macedonian Orthodox Church deteriorated during the ethnic conflicts in Macedonia in the spring of 2001 when both organizations acted as religious wings of the rival ethnic groups. The debate over the constitutional changes and the equality of all religions were the main reasons behind this conflict.<sup>74</sup> The ethnic Albanians tried to reduce the privileged status

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<sup>72</sup> Robert W. Mickey, "Citizenship, Status, and Minority Political Participation: The Evidence from the Republic of Macedonia," in Gerd Nonneman, Tim Niblock, Bogdan Szajkowski, (eds.), *Muslim Communities in the New Europe*, Lebanon: Ithaca Press, 1996, pp. 61-62.

<sup>73</sup> Macedonia: War on Hold. ICG Balkans Briefing Paper, Skopje/Brussels, 15 August 2001, pp. 4,5.

<sup>74</sup> See Ulf Brunnbauer, "Doch ein historischer Kompromiss? Perspektiven und Probleme der Verfassungsreform in Makedonien," *Südosteuropa*, 7-9 (2001), p. 361.

of the Macedonian Church. In accordance with the Ohrid agreement, the name of the Macedonian Orthodox Church would remain in Article 19 of the Constitution but “the Islamic Community, the Roman-Catholic Church and other religious communities” would also be mentioned.<sup>75</sup>

### **Conclusions**

In Albania, where there is a large Bektashi community, the Sunni identity has always been less dominant than in Kosovo and Macedonia. During the Cold War period, the Albanian Communist Party followed a much stricter religious policy than the Yugoslav Communist Party. Furthermore, in the 1990s, the Albanians of Albania proper enjoyed greater stability than the Albanians of Kosovo and Macedonia. However, as early as the last years of the communist regime, there were some dissident views in Albania relating Albanian identity to Islam, even though these were exported from Kosovo. In the post-communist period, Albania witnessed the re-emergence of religion as a new social force. The country has also been exposed to intensive missionary activities, with Muslims making up the majority of the converts. As Clayer puts it, in this new era, Islam seems to be on the defensive.

Kosovo is the hotbed of the Albanian question in the Balkans. The existence of a small Albanian Catholic Community (which is not the case in Macedonia) and the influence of the Catholic Church in Kosovo are important factors shaping the intellectual life of the province. Since the 1970s, Prishtina University has provided the majority of the Albanian national leadership, which has always been strongly secular. According to official reports, not even one religious student participated in the Kosovo riots of 1981. However, in time, the secular Albanian elite felt the need for the help of Islamic circles.

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<sup>75</sup> Macedonia: War on Hold. ICG Balkans Briefing Paper, Skopje/Brussels, 15 August 2001, p. .

The Islamic Community was to join Albanian resistance to the Serbs in order to support the Albanian cause. The old ethnic tension in Kosovo seems to be the major reason

behind the fact that the majority of the intellectuals that stress the role of Islam in the Albanian national identity are from Kosovo, even though an important part of the Kosovar elite reject an Islamic identity.

In Macedonia, as early as the 1980s the state authorities were claiming that the Albanians were using Islam as a tool to assimilate the smaller Muslim groups. Even though the Muslim Albanians of western Albania have retained many elements of traditional Islam and are considered conservative, the Albanian leaders and the major Albanian parties in Macedonia have secular and nationalistic goals. However, some links do exist between the Islamic Community and the Albanian political parties and some foreign religious and charity organizations. *Two years* after the international military intervention in Kosovo, ethnic conflict spilled over into Macedonia. During this conflict and the negotiations leading up to the Ohrid agreement signed between the Macedonian authorities and the Albanian leaders in 2001, the Islamic Community tried to protect the religious rights of the Muslims.

The Sunni Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina are South Slavs like the Croats and Serbs, whose language they share, while the Albanians have a distinct ethnic background and a language of their own. The Albanians are divided into three religious groups, with the Muslims, who constitute the majority of the Albanians, further subdivided into two groups: Sunnis and Bektashis. In other words, the Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) and Albanians have contrasting social structures that have determined the parameters of the role of Islam in the formation of their national identities. Islam was

the most important ethnic element for the Bosniaks, while it could not be a unifying factor for the Albanians. However, Islam is still playing different roles in different Albanian Communities. The examination of the political developments in post-communist Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia clearly shows clearly that different political frameworks and international developments are also important factors shaping not only the relation between Islam and politics but also between Islam and national identity.

