Report From an Osce Monitor for the Albanian Elections:
29th June, 1997
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First published in Illyria, 9-ll July, 1997

Amongst a population (approximately 3.2 illion) in possession of an estimated one million guns, mostly kalashnikovs as well as grenades and other more powerful weapons, I personally feel that it would not have been possible for the June 29 Albanian election to have proceeded without the protection of observers and military security.

The climate of violence leading up to the election could be felt from the moment of arrival in Albania, but our observer team all remarked on how quickly we adjusted to acceptance of the almost continuous sound of gunshots and occasional bombs, often at very close hand, the sight of individual armed guards on rooftops of private property, and gangs of men with guns at the roadside even in Tirana.

Throughout election day our team several times encountered a convoy of four private cars and a red van all filled with heavily armed men who were not welcomed anywhere. There was no way of knowing whether they were, as they apparently claimed, Democratic Party (DP) members doing their own monitoring nor how they carried out this duty, or whether they were local vigilantes or thugs taking control of the area. It was this same gang who we found moving in on a polling station as they closed (after a somewhat tense confrontation, they left); and again later on the main road back to Tirana, stopping cars, but permitting our military convoy to pass. In most cases the Polling Station Committees (PSC's) were composed of members from at least 10 of the 18 listed parties and worked with remarkable cooperation in their desire to discover the true will of their constituents. It appeared that the intimidation came from outside the constituencies in the form of armed gangs who drove around between polling stations making their presence known by shooting into the air in the vicinity of the stations.

The gratitude of the Committee members for our presence and their unanimous requests for our help and direction in conducting the formalities in the most correct manner, was moving. The greatest concern was always expressed in getting the untampered protocols to the
Zone Executive Committees (ZEC's) after their official local counting, and it was mostly at the ZEC's that gross irregularities were observed, confirming the fears of the PSC Committees. Our mandate was only to observe, so our assistance could only go as far as reminding enquirers that they all had official manuals in which were written the exact rules, or asking to see signatures. As observers (from 32 countries) we were given extremely high security protection by the 7,000 multi-national forces. My group was graciously hosted in an Italian military camp south of Lushnje. We had excellent food accompanied by wine and beer with meals; the Colonel gave up his private bathroom for us women. To reach the camp involved a 4-hour drive in convoy in military vehicles. We drove through apparently deserted towns with empty sidewalks and cafes; in fact the fearful populations were holed up in their homes and armed in self-defence. They made any necessary trading brief and early in the morning. In a nearby deserted town two burnt-out tanks stood in the main square beside a ruined 4-storey building; 5 police had died in a shoot-out two days prior to our arrival. In this Socialist stronghold, it was supposed that the aggressors had been DP supporters.

At the military camp we were met by Long Term Observers who had already surveyed as many as possible of the 152 PSC's in the immediate areas in order to assess the best way to cover the stations on election day. With a strong Italian military escort we started election day at 4.45am in order to observe the opening of a number of PSC's. Most had not received their ballot papers (printed in Italy) until the morning of the election, although they were due to open at 7am. The general unfamiliarity with the fairly complicated materials, including two separate ballot papers per voter (one for the parliamentary election, the other for the monarchy referendum), caused delay in opening at many stations. Voters took advantage of the protection of the military covering our visits, to get to the polls. No tally was kept on the gender of voter attendance, though it was clearly predominantly male. At most PSC's I visited, the Committees were made up entirely of men, however, three that I visited each had one woman member. It was generally agreed that in the circumstances the efforts of the Committees at the over 4,000 polling stations were truly remarkable in their diligence especially as they were faced with very real fears of violent intimidation.

Of the many minor irregularities our team observed at the PSC's, most were considered to be due to inexperience, lack of proper prior instruction and general inefficiency under extremely difficult conditions. For example one polling booth was placed in a toilet cubicle for lack of
other privacy, while another station managed with no form of voting booth. Yet another was placed in a maternity ward, but many of the women were unable to leave their beds and it was not permitted to take the ballots to the bedridden voters. Prisoners were deprived of a vote, as was anyone outside the country (thus excluding the thousands of Albanians who have only recently emigrated unless they were able to return to their place of origin at least 24 hours prior to voting). Furthermore the guides and drivers of the OSCE monitors were also deprived of their votes as they were out of their own areas.

On arrival at our first PSC to observe the opening, we found the Chairman (DP) clinging to all the ballot papers and voters' lists, hurrying away from the allocated polling venue. He had taken a personal decision to move the PSC to another building nearby in the interests of safety (it had no windows whereas he feared that the allocated building with windows was more vulnerable). A heated argument ensued as other members of the Committee forcibly grabbed back the ballot papers. After this violent encounter the Chairman left in fury, taking with him the voters' lists. Fortunately another copy was available and the rest of the Committee set up the PSC without, however, the mandatory signature of the Chairman. On return to the same PSC to observe the counting in the evening, we learned that it had been announced on national radio that the Chairman had been killed (a report, we were assured, that was not true). We were unable to follow up on the story as we were radioed out of the village by our Italian military escort who saw the need to get us all out hastily before nightfall. At this crucial moment we discovered a flat tyre which was speedily mended as tension rose amongst the gathering crowd around us. Antonia Young is Research Associate at Colgate University and was an observer for IFES/OSCE (International Foundation for Election Systems/Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe)