

Towards the Albanization of the Religious Hierarchy in the country

By Xhavit Shala

On Christmas day,¹ the Albanian religious authorities received a pledge by Prime Minister Berisha that the government would set up a fund² “so that our religious communities could carry out all of their services and activities in a manner independent from the state and any other sources.”³ The fulfillment of this promise with the introduction of the legal measures would mark the repositioning of the Albanian state and a departure from its position of neutral passiveness in religious matters. This would start the process of gradually resolving the issue of [Albanization] of the religious hierarchy in Albania.

The new position of the Albanian government on the funding of religious communities would mark a return to the position that the Albanian patriots of the early years after independence introduced. To keep religious communities from coming under the control of foreigners, the statesmen of that time approved a proper legal infrastructure to support the “nationalization” of religious hierarchy in Albania. The law “On Religious Communities” of 1923 sanctioned several important principles that helped give shape not only to the secular nature of the Albanian state and its western orientation, but also resolve several important issues such as funding for religious clergy, the nature of the relationship between the clergy in Albania and their spiritual authorities outside the country and the manner of election of the heads of religious communities⁴. The law determined that salaries of religious clergy would be partially financed by the state coffers in proportion with the population of each community and that the heads of religious communities would be Albanian “from flesh and blood”. These lawmakers were able to secure not only the independence of Albanian clergy from foreign funding but the control of religious communities by Albanians also.

The repositioning of the Albanian state on the issue of funding for religious communities would mark a departure from the unjustifiable position of “neutral passiveness” practiced during the last 15 years in relations with religious communities. Despite the form of political regime in the country, the authorities in power from 1923 to 1967 decided to legally regulate the matter of foreign financing for our religious communities. It is regrettable that during the transition years no proper accommodation to this issue was

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² The article was first published in the daily “Korrieri” on January 5, 2006

³ A promise made by Prime Minister Berisha during his Christmas visit to the Catholic Church on December 25.

⁴ Xhavit Shala- “Enough to the passiveness in religious matters”, March 2005.

found. The failure to provide any state support to religious communities goes against the goals that a democratic government should share. Only the Communist International enforced such a policy of abstaining from providing any assistance to religion, and that was a policy that only the proletarian government must abide by.⁵

The Albanian Center for National Security Studies has consistently argued for a policy of “active laïcité” by the Albanian state as the only position best suited to the characteristics of relations between the state and religious communities in Albania. The Center, through its many publications, has made efforts to sensitize state structures, religious and civil society bodies and others about the necessity of drafting a law on religious communities in Albania and the restitution of properties to these communities. These two issues have a very important impact on the national security of the country.

The approval of the draft on the financing of religious communities, either as a separate bill or part of a legal package on religious matters, the restitution of the properties and the creation of a special fund for the compensation of properties would provide a serious contribution to the national security of Albania. This would create the conditions for the “nationalization” of the religious hierarchy in Albania.

The Muslim and the Bektashi community have [by a well established tradition] been headed by Albanian citizens. However, the restitution and compensation of properties and the provision of funding by the state would make them all feel a little bit more “Albanian”. This would increase their independence from foreign financing, which often time is provided with strings attached. This funding is often conditioned with the spread of radical teachings which are foreign to our religious tradition and present a threat to our national security.

Unlike the Muslim Community, the Catholic Community, given it’s to the universal nature, has historically maintained its close dependence on the Vatican. The help provided both in finances and clergy by the Vatican in rebuilding the Catholic Community in Albania has played a key and indispensable role in the reorganization of the Church. Nonetheless, the Albanian priests now think that the Albanian Catholics have moved beyond the situation of emergency and in line with Vatican’s policy they are seeking a more dominant role in the leadership of the church, namely a move toward the Albanization of the catholic hierarchy. Gjergj Fishta in his poem “with the arrival of the Turkish pasha, the foreign bishop also arrived” was referring to a different time and age. There is no Turkish pasha now and there is no need to have foreign bishops. “The faith will never get from the foreigner a service that is better than the one provided by the native. Because the faith is the word. When the word is not spoken clearly, when it is not spoken like the people speak it, the people will not understand it. Regardless of how capable of a philosopher one may be, when you speak in a different tongue you want be able to convey things properly to the people. It is fifteen years now that the people are not

⁵ Communist International Program, page. 38, London, 1929.

hearing the catholic clergy deliver the Word in Albanian,” father Zef Pellumbi,⁶ a co-worker with those who made Dante speak in Albanian, says in a daily.

The situation is even more problematic when we look at the orthodox community, which has been supposedly “nationalized” since September of 1922. The Albanian patriots headed by Noli were able to achieve the separation from the Greek Church and complete the establishment of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Such a status was recognized by its sister churches in 1937. After the fall of communism, the orthodox community also received the assistance of the Greek Orthodox Church in both material assistance and clergy. The appointment of a Greek citizen to the head of the Albanian Orthodox Church sparked serious controversy in Albania as an appointment that went against the statute and practices of Albanian orthodoxy. However, more recently, Archbishop Janullatos in an interview given to an Albanian daily says that the Albanian clergy are now ready and worthy to replace him.⁷ While the independence of the Albanian Orthodox Church from the Greek Church is officially recognized, it is very surprising to note that the Greek Embassy in Tirana released a few days ago a statement made by the Presidency of the Conference of European Churches that allegedly expressed concern over some incident of a religious character that had taken place in southern Albania.⁸

The decision to provide state funding to religious communities, the preparation and training of ministers, and the issue of restitution and compensation of properties to religious communities, alongside the issue of a legal framework regulating the relations between religious communities and the state would provide a serious contribution towards the cause of freedom of religion and the Albanization of religious hierarchy in our country.

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⁶ In an interview, titled “Albania taken over by foreign priests” given to daily Shekulli on December 23, 2005, the 83 years old Franciscan father Zef Pëllumbi, expresses his concern at the unreasonable increase in the number of foreign priests at the Catholic Church, that as father Pëllumbi says has never happened before since the times of Buzuku, Budi, Bogdani dhe Kazazi. He criticizes the Vatican, the Albanian government and society that does not react against the rule of the foreign clergy who for 15 years now do not speak to their believers in Albanian.

⁷ Interview published in weekly A.B.C. issue no 16.

⁸ A statement issued by the Greek Embassy in Tirana and carried by daily «Koha Jonë», on December 23, 2005, says that "the Conference of European Churches that was held in Geneva from December 14-14, 2005 was informed of the particular concern about some local incidents in Albania, such as in Permet, Lukovë, Libohovë, Kodra, etc. Where the restitution of the religious facilities was either not permitted or was revoked by the local authorities ... Respect for the freedom of religion and human rights is an especially important point for European democracy, international law and regional stability. The Conference of European Churches will continue to follow closely the developments related to this matter ", says the closing of this statement, which seems to imply that the Greek state will pay greater attention to the issue of respecting religions and the restitution of properties to religious communities in Albania.