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The June 1924 movement in Albania and the neutrality of Korça

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Abstract

In June 1924 in Albania, the political clashes that had begun a year earlier culminated in an armed conflict. The opposition forces, taking advantage of the assassination of the Albanian politician Avni Rustemi, organized an uprising and seized power. Prominent political and military figures of the time took part in this movement. The most important figure of these events was Fan Noli, a deputy from Korça. The uprising was centered in Vlora, but other northern cities, such as Shkodra, also supported it. Korça, however, remained neutral in this confrontation. This paper seeks to answer the question: Why did Korça choose to remain neutral? To understand the reasons behind this choice, we will analyze the political and historical situation of the Korça region and the factors that led to this stance.

Keywords: neutrality, war, Korça, politics, uprising.

1. Introduction

From the declaration of Albania's independence on 28 November 1912 to the decision of 9 November 1921,¹ (Puto, 2003, p. 356) the history of the Korça region was marked by uncertainty. Korça was occupied on 20 December 1912 (Dushku, 2012, p. 186) by Greek troops, who remained there until March 1914, even though on 11 August 1913 the London Conference of Ambassadors had issued a decision on the southern borders, assigning Korça to Albania (Puto, 2003, p. 161). A few months later, on 17 December 1913, the Boundary Commission, convening in Florence, made a final decision on Albania's southern borders, confirming that the Korça region belonged to Albania (Murrzaku, 2017, pp. 604-605).

¹ The Conference of Ambassadors in Paris, on 9 November 1921, decided to recognize the Albanian government as the government of an independent and sovereign state, thereby putting an end to Greek claims over the Korça region.

Despite these decisions, Greece did not withdraw its troops from the Korça region, advancing various claims. The Greek government resisted the pressure of the Great Powers until 13 February 1914, when they presented a joint note requesting the ratification of the Florence Protocol. The Greek government accepted the decision of the Great Powers, promising to withdraw its troops from Albania by 31 March, but declared that the withdrawal would be gradual (Murrzaku, 2017, pp. 618-619).

Only a few months later, internal uprisings and the outbreak of the First World War enabled Greece to return to Korça. Greek troops remained in the city until the autumn of 1916, when French forces of the Armée d'Orient (Army of the Orient), headquartered in Thessaloniki, advanced toward Albania and entered Korça on 22 October 1916.

After the French troops were stationed in the Korça region, they found themselves in an unclear situation. At first, they supported Venizelos' forces by expelling those loyal to King Constantine, who had occupied the region for two years. These measures were not welcomed by the local population, which, organized into armed bands, resisted the French troops. Faced with this situation, the French command entered into negotiations with the leaders of the Albanian bands. The talks concluded with an agreement (Ago, 2004, pp. 22-38) that was proclaimed on 10 December 1916. According to this agreement, a local Albanian administration was established and the Greek troops withdrew.

After the end of the First World War, the status of the region was once again brought into discussion, and Greek demands at the Paris Peace Conference for the annexation of the area continued persistently. Albania risked being partitioned again by the territorial claims of its neighbors. Greece's demands were opposed during the first half of 1919 by the Italian government, but in July 1919 it signed the Tittoni-Venizelos Agreement.²

In this situation, Albanian politicians undertook a new initiative and called for the convening of a congress. The Congress of Lushnja, held from 21 to 31 January 1920, marked the beginning of a new period for Albania. The government that emerged from this congress faced the major challenge of uniting the country's regions with the central authority. Within a short time, it achieved significant successes. In Korça, however, the situation was difficult, as the region's status continued to be the subject of debate in the League of Nations. Meanwhile, on 12 May 1920, the command of the "Armée d'Orient" (Army of the Orient) ordered the withdrawal of French troops from the Korça region. Although the order was classified as highly secret, it became known to the public and created a tense atmosphere in the city.

The fear that Greek troops might enter the region alarmed the Albanian government and local politicians. On 24 May, local authorities sent notifications to the governments of the Great Powers stating that they "opposed the occupation of Korça by Greek troops." On 26 May, a large protest was organized by the inhabitants of Korça and

² According to the agreement, Italy committed to supporting Greek ambitions in Albania for the annexation of Korça and Gjirokastra. In return, Greece pledged to support Italy's demands for a mandate over Albania and sovereignty over Vlora.

the surrounding villages, where a resolution was drafted calling for union with the government in Tirana (AMPJ, D. 37, Viti 1920, p. 171). Following these events, the government in Tirana intervened and entered into contact with the Greek government. The two sides drafted the Protocol of Kapshtica. According to the agreement, the Greeks would refrain from occupying the Kaza of Korça until the issue was resolved either by the Peace Conference or through an agreement between the two governments (ASHSH, 2020, p. 319). In this way, Korça came under the administration of the government in Tirana.

2. Literature review

The events of June 1924 have been widely studied by Albanian historiography. The problem lies in the fact that communist historiography used this moment to diminish the figure of the politician Ahmet Zogu. In communist historiography, he is portrayed as a man who seized power through cunning and force. All of his contributions to the national cause were denied, even though he was the dominant political figure in Albania from the 1920s to 1939. In contrast to him, another name of great importance in Albanian history was elevated: Fan Noli, cleric, diplomat, politician, writer, and historian.

For this purpose, the events of June 1924 were ideologized and treated in such a way that the historical truth was distorted. They were presented as a broad popular movement, a "revolution" that brought consequences and changes to Albania's political and social life. The only exceptions were foreign scholars such as Joseph Swire. This approach continued even after the collapse of the communist system (Akademia e Shkencave e Shqipërisë, 2007).

Meanwhile, after the fall of communism in Albania, several historians rewrote this event and evaluated it according to scientific criteria, outside the framework of communist censorship. The term "revolution" was replaced by concepts such as "coup d'état," "uprising," or "movement." It is important to emphasize that, based on archival research, the term "revolution" does not appear in the documentation of the time. Likewise, in the press of that period, we have not encountered the use of this term prior to the entry of the insurgent forces into Tirana.

On the other hand, studies on this event have focused primarily on the political and military clashes and their consequences. Although it has been treated as a popular movement, the actions and reactions of the population in different regions of the country, as well as their stance during those moments, have not been properly studied. In this study, we have followed a new approach. We have made use of the contemporary press of the city of Korça, which provides valuable information about these events. The press of the time examines the political developments in Albania during the years 1920-1924, while also addressing the local situation and the issues affecting the Korça region. Based on this press material, we have been able to understand the attitude of the inhabitants of the Korça region and their stance toward these events.

3. Korça within Albania's Political Dynamics of the 1920s and the Figure of Fan Noli

From the middle of 1920 onward, Korça played an important role in Albania's political and social life. After the Kapshtica Agreement, the Albanian government placed the Korça region under its administration. The government appointed Koço Kotta as prefect and ordered those elections be held for the governing council of the Prefecture. (*Gazet' e Korçës*, 1920) A few months later, elections were also held for the municipalities of the region.

In November 1920, the issue of elections in the country was raised in the National Council.³ It was decided that a commission would be created, composed of two representatives of the National Council and two of the government. While the National Council was discussing the electoral law, a movement had begun in Korça demanding the holding of elections for a Constituent Assembly, which, according to the Statute of Lushnja, had the authority to determine the form of the regime in Albania (Naska, 2000, p. 108).

Under the influence of this movement, the government that had emerged from the Congress of Lushnja resigned. The High Council⁴ entrusted Iljaz Vrioni with forming a new government, while the Minister of the Interior, Ahmet Zogu, sent a circular to the country's prefectures announcing that the government had declared elections for the National Council. However, this action provoked a political crisis. The High Council reacted to the circular, emphasizing that it had been issued without its approval (*Gazet' e Korçës*, 1920, p. 1). The formation of the new government did not resolve the crisis because it, too, announced elections, on 5 December, without consulting the National Council (*Gazet' e Korçës*, no. 49, 4 December 1920, 1.).

As a result, a group of deputies, among them representatives of Korça, resigned. A few days later, Koço Kotta, a former deputy, reacted in an article, where he criticized the government for violating the Statute of Lushnja (*Gazet' e Korçës*, 1920,) The conflict between Tirana and the Korça deputies deepened when the deputy prefect of Korça, Nikolla Zoi, ordered the arrest of the former deputy Fazlli Frashëri (*Gazet' e Korçës*, no. 51, 14 December 1920, 1.).

Despite the disagreements that followed the proclamation of the Electoral Law, preparations for its implementation began in Korça. The group led by Koço Kotta, dissatisfied with the situation, published a memorandum in February. The "Memorandum of the Korça Christians" contained a request for a special administration for Southern Albania. This group called on Orthodox believers to refrain from participating in the elections. Among the signatories were several nationalists with important contributions to the national cause.

What initially appeared to be a local event soon provoked debate in the League of

³ The Congress of Lushnja elected a Senate of 37 members which would exercise legislative power. On 31.03. 1920 this body was named the National Council.

⁴ The High Council was the collegial head of the Albanian state and its highest representative. It held the highest executive authority, which it exercised through the government.

Nations, when Greece attempted to exploit it for its own interests. In response, on 18 June 1921, the signatories of the memorandum published the article "The Question of the Borders in the League of Nations and the Protest of the People of Korça." The article clarified to international public opinion that "the maneuver Greece was attempting to carry out by using the 'Memorandum of the Albanian Christians' was deceitful."

The debates reflected in the Albanian press concerned internal issues of the Albanian state. The signatories condemned the efforts of the Greek representative at the League of Nations to instrumentalize Albania's internal affairs in the service of Greek interests (Posta e Korçës, no. 10, 18 June 1921, 2.).

From February to 5 April 1921, the first parliamentary elections in the history of Albania were held. It was an important moment for the political future of the country. In Korça, the elections were conducted normally. An article in Koha emphasized that the elected deputies were individuals well-tested in the national cause (Koha, no. 22, 19 February 1921, 2).

During 1921, Korça once again became the center of several movements of national scope. In April, the city was visited by two Albanian Orthodox priests who had come from the United States. They first stopped in Pogradec, where they held a mass in the Albanian language. Afterward, they traveled to Korça and celebrated mass in Albanian at the Church of St. George, in accordance with the wishes of the Christian population (Koha, no. 42, 30 April 1921, 1.). This marked the beginning of the movement that would lead to the creation of the Albanian Autocephalous Church.

Meanwhile, the most important event that concluded the year 1921 was Bishop Fan Noli's visit to the region. In December 1921, Noli entered Korça through Kolonja. A committee had been established to welcome Bishop Noli in the best way possible. The civil and religious authorities of Korça took every measure to prepare for Noli's visit. The most significant moment of the visit was the celebration of the mass in the city's Metropolis.

After this visit, Noli formed a special bond with the city and the region. The Korça area would give him its support throughout his subsequent activity. From there, he began a new chapter in his life, one that would influence later events in Albania. While in Korça, he was offered the post of Minister of Foreign Affairs, a position he held for several months.

The beginning of 1922 coincided with a new political crisis in Albania. The crisis deepened when the irredentist group of the "Committee for the National Defense of Kosovo" confronted the Albanian government, especially Ahmet Zogu, whose figure dominated the Albanian political scene. Noli resigned from the government, and together with his supporters, withdrew from the Popular Party as well (Kadria, 2020, p. 441). In March 1922, the uprising broke out and the offensive toward Tirana began. Unlike in the north, the situation in the south of the country remained calm; in fact, in February-March 1922, partial elections were held in Korça. Noli and his supporters participated in these elections and received the backing of the local press. The press

attacked the leadership of the Popular Party for the way its representatives had chosen the candidates who would run in Korça. Fan Noli, the press emphasized, a figure with important contributions to the national and ecclesiastical cause, had not been consulted in the selection of the candidates. The newspapers warned voters not to be deceived and to weigh their choice carefully before casting their vote.

On 11 March, the election results were announced. The winning candidates were Koli Rodhe, a supporter of Fan Noli, and Skëndo Pojani, who presented himself as the representative of the Popular Party. (Posta e Korçës, no. 94, 11 March 1922, 1) Although Noli did not win the elections in Korça, he strengthened his ties with the city and the region.

During the second half of 1922, Korça was involved in the movement that would lead to the creation of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Noli was not directly engaged in this movement, but his activity in support of a national church had an undeniable influence on the Albanian clergy.

Noli's ties with Korça continued to strengthen, and in the summer of 1923, he returned to the city. During this visit, Noli was welcomed by the authorities and by thousands of citizens. He held open meetings with the people who had gathered to see him on 18 and 19 August 1923. In these gatherings, he demonstrated his eloquence, earning the admiration of the population of Korça. With language that was rich yet simple and accessible, he conveyed his messages directly to the people. In these meetings, Noli addressed numerous problems facing Albanian society at the time, speaking about the political situation and economic issues, and highlighting the difficult circumstances in which Albania found itself (Dilo, 1944, pp. 48-55).

The first round of elections was held on 26 November. The press did not report any incidents during the first round of elections in Korça: "In every place where the elections were held, not even the slightest incident occurred to disturb the process. Among the second-level electors there are members of the Popular Party, Liberals, and Independents." (Gazeta e Korçës, no. 53, 8 December 1923, 2.)

Unlike the atmosphere and expectations in the Prefecture of Korça, the Popular Group emerged as the clear winner, obtaining 12 deputies, while the Liberal Party managed to win 4 deputies, among them Fan Noli (Dervishi, 2006, p. 196). Noli was aware of the result, although he expressed his disappointment in a message to Vatra: "A victory, but not complete. Faithless electors (second-level voters) snatched the victory from our hands" (Ikonimi, 2024, p. 199).

The disappointing result of the Liberal Party in Korça generated dissatisfaction, and there were even insinuations of religious division. These claims, however, were unfounded, as Noli's figure was respected and regarded as an apostle of Albanian nationalism. Sulejman Mborja, a descendant of the Mborja (Venxha) family, together with other Albanians in Istanbul, decided to financially support Fan Noli as a sign of respect for his activity.

4. The Political Crisis and the Neutrality of Korça during the June 1924 Events in Albania

The events of June 1924 had their roots in an earlier crisis. At the end of 1923, the group opposing Ahmet Zogu made several attempts to overthrow him. Shefqet Korça, the commander-in-chief of the Albanian Gendarmerie, and Neki Starova, the prefect of Dibra, declared that they would not obey Zogu and sent instructions to their subordinates to make every effort to prevent his victory in the elections. They went even further in their actions and planned the organization of a coup d'état (Kadria, 2020, p. 441). Zogu, following the advice of British diplomats, chose the path of "peaceful action." He proceeded with the organization of the elections, whose outcome would determine the future of the country.

The election results deepened the crisis even further. Neither side had won more than 50 percent, and neither was in a position to form a government. The opposition used the opening of the Constituent Assembly to accuse the government of electoral manipulation. They demanded Zogu's resignation, but were met with his refusal (Kadria, 2020, p. 569). In the first months of 1924, the political crisis continued within the framework of parliamentary debate, but in the months that followed several incidents occurred that changed the course of events.

On 23 February 1924, as he was entering the Albanian Parliament, an assassination attempt was made against Ahmet Zogu, the Prime Minister of Albania. A few days later, he resigned. On 6 April 1924, another incident occurred that caused great concern in Albania: two American tourists were shot and killed by a band of Albanians. After the investigation, the government declared that it had been a criminal act carried out by outlaws. The opposition, led by Noli, claimed the opposite, alleging that Zogu was responsible and that the killers had been paid to murder some of his political opponents (Swire, 2005, pp. 339-440).

A month later, one of Zogu's fiercest opponents, the deputy Avni Rustemi, was assassinated. The opposition and Fan Noli used this event to their advantage. The opposition declared the murdered deputy a hero and organized a grand funeral for him. Opposition deputies withdrew from the Constituent Assembly and gathered in Vlora, declaring that they were not safe in Tirana (Duka, 2007, p. 145). Luigj Gurakuqi, a highly influential deputy from the north, together with Rexhep Shala, commander of the northern forces, called for parliament to convene in Shkodra. The latter ignored the government's order dismissing him and declared a state of emergency in his region. Two long-standing opponents of Zogu, Bajram Curri and Elez Isufi, rallied their followers and attacked government forces in Krumë. Qazim Qafëzezi, commander of the southern forces, also declared a state of emergency in his area, and Shefqet Korça, commander of the gendarmerie, joined him (Swire, 2005, pp. 340-341).

In this situation, the government of Shefqet Vërlaci resigned. A new government was hastily formed, with Iljaz Vrioni as prime minister, and it began taking measures

to confront the clash that was expected to occur. To deal with the situation, the government appointed Ahmet Zogu as commander of the anti-uprising operation for Northern Albania and Mustafa Aranitasi for the south (Dervishi, 2006, p. 212). The government ordered the strengthening of the gendarmerie with volunteers (AQSH, Fondi 157, V. 1924, D. 40, p 48). Reinforcements were sent to Durrës and to Libofsha (AQSH, Fondi 157, V. 1924, D. 40, p 12, p 16).

Despite the measures taken, the situation remained difficult, and the government was losing control in various cities of Albania. On 5 June, the deputy prefect of Elbasan informed the Ministry of the Interior that in the Dumrea area the majority of volunteers had deserted. An armed force was marching toward Berat (AQSH, Fondi 157, V. 1924, D. 36, p 12, p 34).

At a time when the fighting was turning in favor of the insurgents, a major problem still remained: the situation in the southeast. As we shall see below, Korça had declared its neutrality. While Korça was attempting to remain neutral, following a popular gathering, the mayor of Erseka sent a telegram to Vlora stating that the people of Kolonja supported the national movement. After this, a commission led by the veteran patriot Hasan Qinami went to Korça on 5 June. The commission asked the authorities to mobilize the reservists in order to assist the National Army (Koha, no. 181, 7 June 1924, 1). Greek intervention and territorial claims, as well as the Greek massacres before the First World War, were still vivid in the collective memory of the people. The patriots of Korça viewed any internal instability as an opportunity for Greek forces to repeat the horrific crimes they had committed in 1914.

The first week of June was successful for the uprising: the main cities of Northern and Central Albania were taken under insurgent control. The insurgents entered Tirana on 10 June. In Korça, the entry of the insurgents into the capital was celebrated with a public manifestation called by the municipality on 12 June 1924, at 11:00 a.m. From the description provided by *Gazeta e Korçës*, it appears that the people of Korça welcomed the victory of the movement. Under the leadership of “the Mayor and the Municipal Council, the religious leaders, the commercial club, etc., with the ‘Vatra’ band at the head, they went to the barracks, where they were received by the Deputy Commander of the Battalion, Captain Fehrat Çami, and by the Commander of the Gendarmerie, Captain Elmas Villa,” who thanked the people of Korça for their stance. The atmosphere was festive: sweets were distributed, while the “Vatra” band concluded the celebration by playing the Albanian Hymn (*Gazeta e Korçës*, No 92, 12 June 1924. 1).

5. Conclusion

The political and social developments in Korça during the period 1920-1924 followed a course determined not only by internal factors but also by external ones. The unclear status of the region until 9 November 1921, along with Greek interference in Albania’s internal affairs, made local politicians and the population of the region cautious in their actions.

The politicians of the region were active in Albania's political life, but cautious regarding the internal military clashes that were so frequent in the country during those years. Korça did not take part in the armed confrontations that occurred in Albania at the beginning of 1922. The same position was maintained during the events of June 1924.

Neutrality reflected the national consciousness of the inhabitants of the Korça region and of their elites. This awareness was shaped by the vivid memory of the events of 1914, when foreign interventions brought killings, the destruction of property, and the forced displacement of the population. That experience had instilled in the local elites and in the population the conviction that stability was a necessity. Non-involvement in internal conflicts, especially the preservation of public order, was considered essential to prevent any situation that might be interpreted as an opportunity for intervention.

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