

SECULARISM OF ALBANIAN GOVERNMENT THROUGHOUT 1920-1930 AS A GUARANTEE TO THE RELIGIOUS MINORITIES' RIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

Referring to the statistic data available for the years 1920-1930, three main religions existed in Albania; consequently, the population was divided in Muslims, or also known as Mohammedans, in Catholics and in Orthodox. However, such population division criterion was not uniform in the territory of the Albanian country. Adherents to Muslim religion made the greatest community with regard to numbers, and they lived in almost the entire territory of the country. The Orthodox religious were concentrated mainly in the South and Middle Albania, whereas the Catholic population made the smallest community and was concentrated mainly in the North areas of the country. The division of the population in three religions made Albania one of the most liberal countries of Europe. Such liberalism was affirmed not only to the Fundamental Statutes of Albania, but also to the International Agreement that the Albanian government would sign prior to becoming a member of the League of the Nations. The extended Statute of Lushnje clearly affirmed that Albania had no official religion and that all religions had to be respected. Such approach from the Albanian government was in full compliance with the commitments it would make to the international arena during the signing of several treaties. One of such treaties was the "Declaration on Minorities", signed by the representative of the Albanian government on October 02nd, 1921 to the League of Nations. Such document, of international character, constrained the Albanian government to guarantee to its citizens full protection of their life and freedoms, regardless of their age, nationality, language, race and religion. Furthermore, the document provided that all Albanian citizens could freely practice their religion, unless they were in breach of the public order and customs. Every citizen had the right to change religion upon their wish. The effective laws of that time created a quite environment for the religions to always be respected.

Keywords: Religions, guarantee to rights, Albanian government. Fundamental Statute, Declaration of Minorities.

1.1. RELIGIONS IN ALBANIA

Albania is located in the south-eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula. Although independence was achieved on November 28, 1912, recognition in the international arena as an independent and sovereign state came only on November 9, 1921¹. This date is related to the moment when Albania is recognized as a fully-fledged member state in the League of Nations. From this moment on, the Albanian state would undertake a series of reforms aimed at transforming the country into a modern state of European standards. However, one of the obstacles to achieving this goal was the fact that Albania introduced itself as a country where the majority of the population belonged to the Muslim religion, characteristics that, in terms of culture, ranked the Albania beside the Muslim rather than the European countries. But even though the population belonging to the Muslim religion in Albania made up the majority, it was quite tolerant of the population belonging to other religions, such as the

¹Sejfi Vllamasi, *Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri 1897-1942*, p. 183, "Marin Barleta", Tirana, 1995

Orthodox and the Catholics. Such religious tolerance was explained by the fact that the Islamic religion of the Albanian people had been forcefully imposed for centuries by the Ottoman invaders. So, the values that the Muslim religion carried was not the values of the Albanian people rather, they were imposed by an invading state and were constantly in conflict with the Albanian national identity. In response to such imposed values, the people, regardless of the religious affiliation, maintained and developed the customary traditions it had inherited for centuries, which had determined the establishment of a strong national feeling.

Referring to the statistical data, in the years 1920-1930 the population was divided into three main religions. The division criterion, due to the country's historical factors and landscape, was not uniform in the territory of Albania. The table below gives a detailed framework of the population that resided in the nine Prefectures of Albania, which were the administrative divisions of the country. The population of these administrative units is divided according to its religious affiliation.

Table 1: Population of Albanian prefectures, divided by its religious affiliation in 1923

Prefectures	Mohammedan	Orthodox	Catholic	Total number
Berat	811.125	29.410	-	840.535
Dibra	83.759	1.497	8.740	93.986
Durrës	71.998	5.231	3.837	81.666
Elbasani	77.444	6.183	-	83.627
Gjirokastra	58.963	60.023	Israel.33	119.019
Korça	65.083	49.176	-	114.259
Kosovo	35.166	-	2.987	38.153
Shkodra	28.571	1.896	80.402	120.869
Vlora	27.595	14.799	51	42.445
Total	529.694	168.215	96.050	803959

Table no .1²

In order to have a more simplified view of the population's division by its religion, the table below presents statistical data on the population of three main Albanian regions: North Albania, Middle Albania and South Albania.

Table 2: Albanian population divided by its religions in three regions and the percentage of religion beliefs in each region

	North Albania	%	Middle Albania	%	South Albania	%	Total	%
Mohammedan	160573	19	254884	31	169218	21	584675	71
Catholic	85098	10	3857		32		88987	10
Orthodox	2705		36316	5	119194	14	158215	19
	248376		295057		288444		831877	

Table no.2³

² Teki Selenica, *Shqipëria më 1923*, p.7, printig house "Tirana", Tirana, 1923.

The statistical data in the table show that in Albania, 19% of the population belonged to the Orthodox religion, 10% to the Catholic religion, and 71% to the country's population belonged to the Islamic religion. It is clear that the Christian population (Orthodox and Catholic), as far as numbers are concerned, is a minority compared to the Muslim population. However, as it will be discussed below, the Albanian government, so as to provide equal rights to all religions, would declare that Albania had no official religion.

Referring to Table No. 2, which shows the division of the population by its religion in the three regions of the country, one may notice that Islamic religion prevails in Northern Albania whereas the number of Orthodoxies almost inexistent. The Catholic population is mainly concentrated in Northern Albania; while it is insignificant in South Albania. An interesting fact is that in Southern Albania, where lived 34% of the entire population of Albania, the population belonging to Islam religion made up 21% of the population compared to the 14% of the Orthodox population. Even though statistical data did not reveal, a small Israeli community lived in central Albania. Such community consisted of 35 people.

As far as numbers were concerned, Catholic Christians represented the minority and in total, they did not exceed 88,987. They played a very important role as they carried with them the seal of Western culture, which cut them apart from other communities of the country⁴.

Given that, geographically speaking, the country tended to go towards the developed West, both economically and culturally, Catholics were occupying an important place in building the modern state. Catholics depended on the power of Rome and an apostolic representative was settled in Shkodra. The Catholic Region, from the religious aspect, was governed by the Archbishopric and parted in five bishoprics. The Catholic clergymen were very active in terms of national affairs and they were almost entirely Albanian. They were members of the Franciscans congregation, who, in turn, were also all recruited within the country. The Order of the Jesuits practiced in the north of the country; however their discipline has faced some opposition from the local Albanians. The Catholic community in Albania was summoned to six dioceses extending to 115 settlements. Such dioceses were: the Archdiocese of Durres, the Archdiocese of Shkodra, the Diocese of Alessi, the Diocese of Sapa (Zadrim), the Diocese of Pult and the Abbey of Orosh⁵.

Orthodoxy depended on the Patriarch of Constantinople and was mainly settled on South and Central Albania. The Albanian Orthodox Church was divided into four Metropolises: Metropolis of Korça, Berat, Gjirokastra and recently the Metropolis of Durrës. The Metropolis of Durres was the only one to have a center, which would later be moved to Korça. The Metropolis of Berathad its center in Corfu, while, as far as Gjirokastra was concerned, its center was in Ioannina. There were almost 155,000 worshipers in South and Central Albania declaring to belong to the Orthodox religion. The fact that neighboring countries linked their national identity to the orthodox religion gave this part of the Albanian population a strategic role in establishing the new Albanian state.

There were two minorities living in Albania, who linked their identity to the Orthodox religion. They were the Greek minority and the Montenegrin minority. The Greek minority was concentrated in South Albania, in the Prefecture of Korca, Gjirokastra, and in the Sub-

³ Justin Godart, *Shqipëria në 1921*, p. 126, Bektashi Wisdom, Tirana, 2015.

⁴ Roberto Moroco dela Roka, *Kombi dhe feja në Shqipëri 1920-1944*, p.63, "ELENA GJIKA", Tirana

⁵ Marenglen Verli, *Aspekte rreth krijimit dhe zgjidhjes së çështjes shqiptare*, Vol.I, p.136, "KLEAN", Tirana, 2014.

prefecture of Himara, which was under the influence of the Prefecture of Vlora. In terms of numbers, this was the largest minority living in the territory of Albania. The number of this community reached up to 35,000 individuals. The high presence of the Greek minority would be a reason of disputes between Albania and Greece on the international level. The fate of this minority would be decided with the settlement of the disputes between the two neighboring countries at the Ambassadorial Conference, with Albania guaranteeing the recognition of the status of minorities at the League of Nations. In fact, the membership of Albania to the League of Nations would depend on the signing of the "Declaration on Minorities". This was a document consisting of seven articles listing the rights of the minority population that lived inside the territory of the Albanian country. As for the Montenegrin minority, it lived in North Albania, more precisely in the city of Shkodra. This minority made up a small community of about 1,500 people, who had been settled in the suburbs of Shkodra for a long time and had their church with the mess being held in Serbian.

The Muslim population compared to Catholics and Orthodox constituted the dominant community in Albania. Referring to the above data, Albania had a population of 831,877 of which, 584,675 stated that they were worshipers of the Islamic religion. The large number of Albanians worshipping Islamic religion has many times been mentioned by Serbian and Greek propaganda to label Albania as a small Turkey. Understandably, this denigrating policy of neighboring country aimed at annexing the Albanian lands. Such dominance of Muslim worshipers, statistically speaking, was more pronounced in North and Central Albania. Rather, in South Albania, the ratio between the Orthodox and the Muslim population was more balanced. Such balance was due to the constant presence of the Greek church, which also assisted by Greek-language schools, preached orthodoxy as the only authentic religion blessed by God.

The Mohammedans, as they were called by the European countries, did not have a senior leader in Albania. Their old religious and judicial hierarchy would be guarded by the governments to follow in order to avoid potential religious conflicts. Although the state paid Qadis and Muftis, who performed similar functions to the judges, this did not mean that Albania had an official religion. The Qadi had jurisdiction over divorce and marriage, and with the father's death, he provided on children's rights. The Mufti was Qadi's chief advisor, being more a conscientious adviser to religious matters⁶. These religious figures acted in accordance with Art.2 of the "Declaration on Minorities", which in its third paragraph provided: "appropriate measures would be taken for the Mohammedans, in line with the Mohammedan customs, relevant to the regulation of children's rights and personal status. Although this paragraph is unclear in the specification of such measures, the Albanian government chose not to interfere in the affairs of the Islamic community⁷.

Analyzing the population, the most striking thing is that, in spite of what happened in the Balkan region, worshipers separated their religion from nationality. During the 20s, foreign propaganda spread the idea that Muslims were identified as Turks and Orthodox as Greeks. The propaganda was unfounded as Muslims, Orthodox, and Catholics had cooperated among them to increasingly consolidate Albanian national unity.

⁶ Justin Godart, *Shqipëria në 1921*, p. 128, Bektashi Wisdom, Tirana, 2015

⁷ Beqir Meta, *Minoritetet dhe ndërtimi Kombëtar në Shqipëri (1912 – 1924)*, p.564, Center for Albanological Studies, Institute of History, Tirana 2013

1.2. SECULARISM OF ALBANIAN GOVERNMENT AS A GUARANTEE TO THE RELIGIOUS MINORITIES RIGHTS

During the years 1920-1930 Albania had a strong central government, whereas local government played a secondary role. Albania was a unitary state divided into 9 prefectures, 31 sub-prefectures, 80 regions and 2538 villages⁸. The number of the population, according to the records of the time, amounted to 803,959 inhabitants. The division of the population into three religions, although unique, often constituted a problem that was reflected both in external and internal affairs of the country. Many times, religious diversity in Albania has been used as a weapon by the neighboring countries, which sought to destabilize the fragile Albanian state. Albanian patriots and politicians, so as to withstand the dangers that threatened the country, during the Lushnja Congress, held in 1920, voted and proclaimed the Lushnja Statute. The second chapter of the Statute, entitled "various provisions", article 93, provided:

The Albanian state has no official religion. All religions and religious beliefs are honored and the freedom to practice them is ensured. Religion should not create legal impediments in any way. Religions and beliefs can never be employed for political purposes⁹.

Article 93 of the Statute, which was quite innovatory for the time, clearly stated the secularity of the Albanian state. The sanctioning of state secularism showed concrete ideas of the Albanian political elite, which sought to guarantee a state with European standards, where the spiritual power was separate from the political one. The lawmaker, realizing the importance and difficulties that the newly established Albanian state had to face, allowed and guaranteed the practice of religion. Such provision was aimed at preventing the use of religion as a destabilizing factor, both at local and international level. Article 93 of the Statute clearly defined it, underlining that religion could never be employed for political purposes. The principle of secularism was again confirmed either by the extended Statute of Lushnja or by the Fundamental Statute of the Albanian Republic. This principle was aimed not only at halting the destabilization of the country but, at the same time, at guaranteeing Christian religious minorities from the Muslim majority. Secularism was in full compliance with the commitments made by Albania at the time of accession to the League of Nations. Art. 2 of the "Declaration on Minorities" underlined the fact that: "all citizens of Albania will be provided full protection of their lives and freedom, without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race and religion". The second paragraph was more specific, as it stated that: "all residents of Albania will have the right to freely practice their religion and belief unless they are in conflict with public order and customs. Everyone will have the right to change religion". The choice made by the Albanian state to have no official religion was indirectly protecting the rights of religious minorities by guaranteeing full autonomy in their preaching.

All Albanian governments that would come to power before and after Albania's independence orientated the construction and functioning of the Albanian state toward complete separation from the spiritual power. Any fundamental document and the domestic law of the Albanian state sanctioned the separation of religion from the state authority and specified only the spiritual duties of religious leaders in Albania.

⁸Teki Selenica, *Shqipria më 1923*, p.7, printing house "Tirana", Tirana, 1923

⁹Aleks Luarasi, *Akte Juridike për historinë e shtetit dhe të së drejtës në Shqipëri*, part II, p.77, "Luarasi", Tirana, 1999

However, despite the fact that the Albanian state had many times proclaimed its secularity, it did not hesitate to make the census of the population by the religious divisions. Such was the census of 1930, with the index of religions practiced by Albanians living in the Kingdom of Albania. Referring to the census, there were about 1 million inhabitants, 696 thousand of whom were Albanians of Islamic religion, (200,000 of them belonged to the Bektashi sect), 200 thousand were Orthodox, 105 thousand were Catholics, 204 Israelis, 70 Protestants and 24 atheists. The listed worship facilities were as follows: 1127 mosques, 260 tekkes and mosques of Bektashi, 844 churches and 70 monasteries of Orthodox and 147 Catholic churches. Such records had been inherited since the establishment of the independent Albanian state¹⁰. The data showed that Albanians were religious people who respected every religion that was not in contradiction with their national identity. The presence of worship institutes and three religions in the territory of the Albanian state clearly reflected the peaceful climate that reigned in Albania during the 1920-1930s.

CONCLUSIONS

Albania, because of its geographic position, has always been an intersection between Christian and Muslim culture. Such cultural interchange produced a diversified society from a religious aspect, which however possessed a strong Albanian national identity. This identity had its own characteristics, for the reason that it didn't play a predominant nationalistic role, as it did in the neighboring countries, where nationalism was strongly associated with Orthodox faith. Albania made it possible to develop a multi-religious society characterized by mutual respect of the worship institutions and religions. Islamic religion played an important role in creating this climate of tolerance, and unlike the other Muslim countries it was characterized by the lack of emphasis on Islamic fundamentalism. This was also demonstrated by the fact that, in many areas of Albania, the Muslim population coexisted in full harmony with the Christian population. In order to preserve this interreligious peace, the Albanian state decided to proclaim its secularity through the Statute and the domestic law. The state's secularism was in line with the commitments that Albania had taken before the League of Nations at the time of its accession as a fully-fledged member state among other European states. Proclaiming Albania as a state of no official religion served as a guarantee to the respect of Christian religious minorities' rights against the Muslim majority. Albania, despite the many economic problems it faced during the 1920-1930s, would guarantee to all its citizens the right to freely practice their religion and beliefs unless they were in conflict with public order and customs of the country.

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¹⁰Enver Bytyci, *Shqiptaret, serbet dhe greket*, p. 195, Printing house "KOHA", Tirana, 2005