

Leader in waiting urges Albanians to stay calm

Joanna Robertson and John Sweeney in Tirana

POWER continued to ebb from President Sali Berisha of Albania yesterday as his rival, Fatos Nano, emerged from hiding and four years in prison to give a convincing performance as a leader in waiting.

The contrast with Mr Berisha could not have been more stark. The widely despised president is holed up in his palace on the hill overlooking Tirana, guarded night and day by troops and secret police, and has all but disappeared from public view.

The headquarters of the Socialist Party (which changed its name from the Communist Party in 1991) was awash yesterday with a crowd of earnest faces pressing against the gates.

Inside the building was a scene from the court of an Ottoman sultan: waiting rooms packed with courtiers, supplicants and hangers-on, their cigarette smoke curling in the light from a window. A small knot of men discussed some complexity, their conversation suddenly boiling up in a riot of gestures and scowls, then calming down as suddenly as they dragged on their cigarettes once more.

Mr Nano was in a small meeting room, his face round and genial, with a close-cropped beard. His manner

imposes calm. He has fluent English and a large, Buddha-like stomach. The acting prime minister, Bashkim Fino, was in the room but all activity centred on Mr Nano.

He was released from Tirana prison last week — “a place where if you became scared you just could not survive”.

Mr Nano told the story with a wry smile: “All the other prisoners came to my cell and broke down the door, because they did not want to leave without Fatos Nano. I was held hostage for around 20 hours. Eventually, they walked out of the prison and no one shot them. I did not want to break the law and I waited. The prison director came and said: ‘What are you doing here?’ and then he drove me home.”

A reporter asked if he had been home since.

“I’ve been in many homes,” Mr Nano replied, a subtle allusion to the fear that oppresses many of Mr Berisha’s opponents, who have found it necessary to move from house to house for fear of his new “special police”. One opposition journalist said yesterday: “We are very concerned that Berisha is developing a parallel power structure by creating the special police. He is still very powerful.”

Mr Nano, the leader of the Socialist Party and Albania’s interim prime minister in 1991 after the rebellion

against the communist dictatorship, sent a pacifying message to the Albanian people. “I want to convert my party into a peacemaking and peacekeeping force,” he said. “I am from the south, but my best friends are in the north.”

He stressed his support for the new Government of Reconciliation.

Asked whether he would meet Mr Berisha, he said: “I will shake hands with him, not as president but as an Albanian citizen. He should not step down, but aside,” an elegant distinction which allows Mr Berisha a little dignity.

The president is rumoured to fall prey to fits of screaming fury, but Mr Nano rebuffed a question on his view of Mr Berisha’s state of mind, saying “I’m not a doctor”.

At a later press conference, when Mr Nano’s interpreter fluffed a sentence, making a positive a negative, Mr Nano stepped in gently. “You’re too emotional today. Calm down,” he said. It is a message that Albania would do well to heed.

● A high-level European assessment team arrived in Albania yesterday for talks on how to help the new broad-based government end the anarchy in the Balkan state. The 11-strong team, led by Dutch roving ambassador Jan de Marchant et d’Ansembourg, flew into Tirana by Italian military helicopter from Brindisi.