

Berisha loses grip on northern heartlands

The president sees his homeland turn ugly as the faithful complain of betrayal, reports **Helena Smith** in Shkoder

AFTER years of being treated as a demi-god by people who live in the hills of High Albania, President Sali Berisha is losing face — and faith — among even his fiercest fans as the armed insurrection continues into a second week.

Traditional support in the north for the first non-Communist leader has waned to the point where he is now regarded as just another flawed individual. Many mutter that the great *malok* (highlander) has not handled the crisis well.

"He's been behaving like a dictator. Asking us to use our guns on other Albanians is outrageous," said a policeman guarding the doors to Shkoder's town hall. "In the south we have seen soldiers surrendering to the rebels. If this building was stormed I don't think I'd defend it."

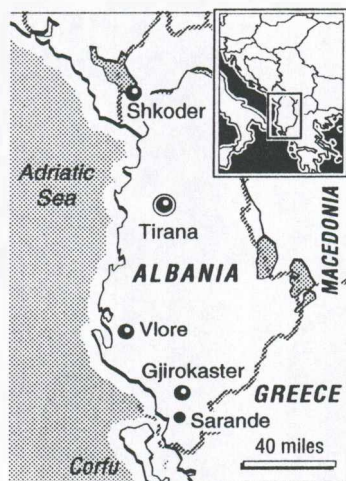
As the only highlander to have ruled Europe's poorest state, Mr Berisha has always been able to depend on support from his fellow *gegs* — one of the two ancient tribes of Albania.

Since he was elected president in April 1992, he has treated his clan well. Northerners have been placed in top positions of power in the government, army and secret police.

The highlanders have still not forgotten the years of persecution and hardship they suffered under the late tyrant Enver Hoxha. As a native of

the southern town of Gjirokaster (which was seized by the insurgents as they stepped up their campaign at the weekend), the despot's sympathies lay with his fellow *tosks* in the richer and fertile south.

High Albania was used as little more than a dumping ground for political prisoners. It is a land so scarred by industrial waste, idle factories,



mud, litter, and hovels, that under Hoxha few "law-abiding" Albanians were encouraged to visit it. They had heard of its darkness and fabled blood feuds, but were shocked when the country opened up and internal travel was allowed.

In the poor towns and villages that dot the region, the drop in support for Mr Beri-

sha highlights the lack of moral legitimacy his right-wing Democratic Party now enjoys and could ultimately decide his political future.

In Shkoder the trend against Mr Berisha started becoming noticeable during local elections last October when the Democratic Party lost the vote to a nationalist-monarchist alliance six months after winning a manipulated national poll.

In the community of Pos-triba, recent attempts at forming a militia group by the mayor, Hamdi Ura, to "protect the president" fell on stony ground.

The inhabitants say they feel as strongly as Mr Berisha about the "red Communist terrorists" he has accused of staging the revolt, few were prepared to take up arms against them.

"What would they be fighting for, an imitation democracy?" asked Merita Ndoka, a journalist at the town's state-controlled local radio station. "Most people in Shkoder are unemployed, their only chance of work is street trade, they don't feel motivated to defend a party which has failed to improve their lives."

Members of the regime openly admit they have recruited and armed volunteers over the past month, not least in Tirana's shanty towns, to defend "democracy and the president". Staff at Rilindja Demokratike, the party's official mouthpiece and the only newspaper to be published following the imposition of emergency law, now go to work armed with automatic weapons.

Champions go to war, page 9

THE GUARDIAN

10.3.97

p 2

President's promise of fresh elections and a coalition met with jeers as opponents insist he must go

Concessions fail to quell Albania revolt



Joanna Robertson in Vlora and Helena Smith in Shkoder

THE air crackled with gunfire last night as southern Albania celebrated its first political victory over the regime of President Sali Berisha.

Tracer bullets lit the sky in Vlora, Sarande and Gjirokastr as people took up their looted weapons and let loose a volley of machine-gun fire and grenades.

"It's a celebration with Kalashnikovs," said General Skender Sera, one of the commanders of the military committees in the key coastal town of Vlora. "Berisha's giving up step by step. He's going to his end."

The jubilation followed a sudden appearance by Mr Berisha on national television. Surrounded by leaders of the opposition parties, he made his biggest concession yet to the armed committees now in command of three southern towns. He promised fresh elections by June at the latest, and the formation of a coalition government of "national reconciliation".

He also extended a week-long amnesty for insurgents to give up their weapons, after an earlier deadline expired yesterday without any sign of their doing so.

But while celebrating the president's clearest sign of weakness in the week-long insurrection, the rebels scoffed at his proposals, reiterating their position that nothing less than Mr Berisha's resignation would end the revolt.

The opposition parties, which have endorsed Mr Berisha's plan, seemed to hold as little sway over the rebellious southerners.

Meanwhile, support for the regime was falling dramatically in Mr Berisha's northern heartland. As the only highlander to have ruled Europe's poorest state, Mr Berisha has pinned his hopes on rallying support from his fellow gags — one of the two tribes to have inhabited Albania since time immemorial.

But officials in Shkoder, the northern region's main city, yesterday estimated that the



An Albanian woman waves a rifle during an anti-Berisha demonstration in the southern town of Sarande at the weekend PHOTOGRAPH: GEORGE KARACHALIS

president's popularity has declined by as much as 80 per cent since countrywide protests against the collapse of government-backed investment schemes escalated into violence in the past week.

Although most of the northern highlanders were too poor to invest in the fraudulent funds, the north is now restive about the regime's increasingly repressive nature. Mr Berisha's trebling of the size of the Shik secret police, and widespread official corruption are held against him.

At the weekend, Gjirokastr joined the rebellion, while in Vlora there are road blocks every 300 yards in the town centre, guarded by men brandishing guns under the command of unit officers.

Every car is stopped and questioned in the frantic search for possible agents of the secret police.

"The Shik are our only enemies within the town," a guard said. "We have to seek them out. We have to rid ourselves of them." Eight suspected Shik officers have

been arrested in the past two nights, and are being held prisoner in isolation pending trial in court. It is not clear who will administer justice in a town that has cut its links with the law.

Vlora is determined not to give up its fight until President Berisha has resigned. "As long as he is in that chair there won't be any peace. We will not give up our weapons," Gen Sera said.

Vlora is now in communication with Sarande and Gjirokastr, and the town has set

up an intelligence service. Food is scarce, and supply trucks have to come from Italy and Greece. The town military committee is due to meet this morning to discuss supplies and the next strategic move — the taking of the nearby town of Fier.

Gen Sera was a senior member of the former dictator Enver Hoxha's army, which had no ranks. He was promoted to general under President Berisha, but was sacked the same year. Commander Petriti Agaj de

fectured from the Albanian navy less than a month ago. "We are not rebels, we are not communists, we are not terrorists," he said. "We are for democracy and human rights. All the people have joined together for these things."

He is convinced that the naval and military forces based on the nearby Sazan Island will sail across to join Vlora within the next 48 hours.

Berisha loses grip, page 6; Champions go to war, page 9

THE GUARDIAN

10.3.97

P. 6.

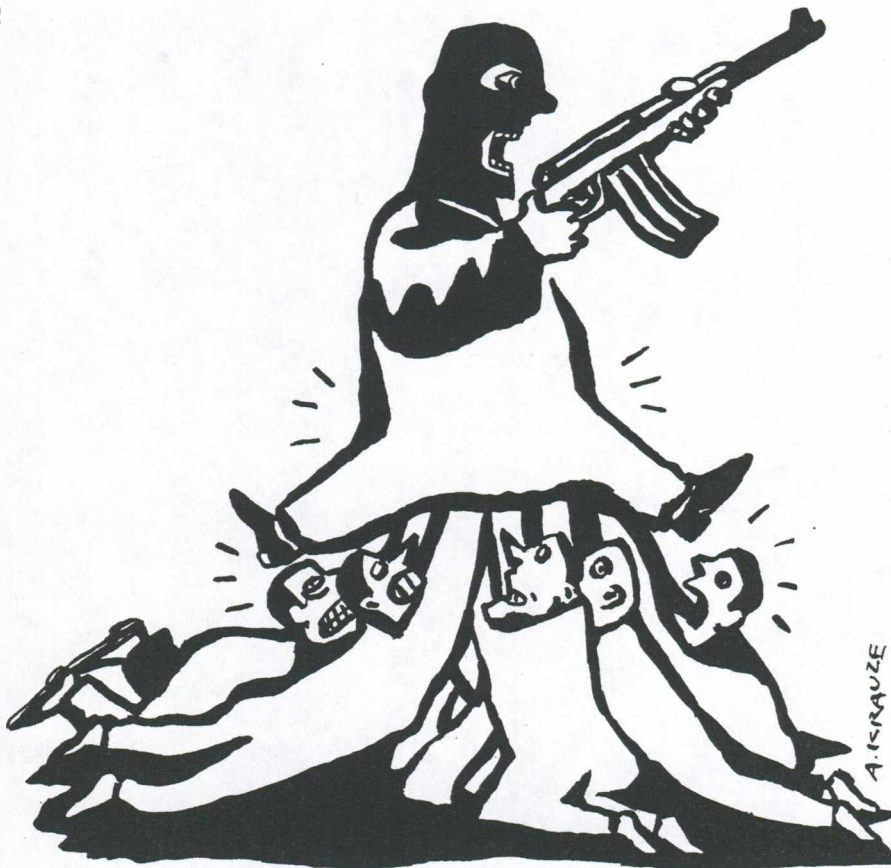
Richard Norton-Taylor untangles the extraordinary history that has polarised media commentators on Albania into two groups trading insults with each other

Champions go to war

AN INTRIGUING sub-plot is being played out amidst the plethora of British press coverage on the deepening crisis in Albania. Two camps, originally divided by history and ideology, have been engaged in increasingly bitter verbal skirmishes over the actions of President Sali Berisha. Yesterday, their differences escalated into open warfare.

Under the headline, "The media back the communists — as usual", the Sunday Telegraph carried a fierce attack on Berisha's critics, including Miranda Vickers, who has written for the Guardian, and James Pettifer, who writes for the Times. The Telegraph article was written by Anthony Daniels, an observer at last year's Albanian elections with the self-styled British Helsinki Human Rights Group, run from the home of Oxford University's professor of modern history, Norman Stone.

Pettifer, said Daniels, had recently written a guidebook of Albania whose description of the former ruling Communist Party's attack on religion "was about as historically accurate as describing Kristallnacht as a spontaneous protest by German citizens against the prices in Jewish-owned shops". Daniels — a medical doctor by profession — said that Pettifer last year publicly called for the overthrow of Berisha at a seminar at London University's School of East European and Slavonic Studies, a claim vigorously denied yesterday by one of those present. Daniels described the opposition as "an alliance of mafiosi and communists", a phrase used to describe the rebels and rioters in an article in the Wall Street Journal last week by Mark Almond, an Oxford historian who has also visited Albania for the British Helsinki Human Rights



Group. Daniels did not mention that Pettifer and Vickers are leading members of the Albanian Society of Britain, whose president is a former senior diplomat, Sir Reginald Hibbert, and whose supporters include Lord Rothschild. For years the society, which was purged of its Stalinist left in 1991, has been fighting a largely underground war with the Albanian Association of Great Britain, which it accuses of perpetrating a simplistic, right-wing, nationalist interpretation of Albanian history, reflected now by cheer-

leading for Berisha. According to Hibbert, the deep divisions between the two camps can be traced to the second world war when he served in the Special Operations Executive with the Albanian partisans, including the country's future communist dictator, Enver Hoxha. Another SOE group, including Julian Amery, the future Tory MP and Foreign Office minister, attached themselves to the nationalists and monarchists under King Zog. Amery and his friends in the association regularly met at his Belgravia home in Eaton Square, ini-

tially putting their faith in Zog's son, Leka. After the communist regime collapsed in 1991, Amery and his former SOE colleague, David Smiley, decided Berisha was their man. They persuaded the Foreign Office and the Conservative Party to give him diplomatic and material support. Amery died last year and the association's titular head is now Sir Geoffrey Pattie, Tory MP for Chersey and Walton, former trade and industry minister, and chairman of GEC-Marconi. Vickers, who makes no secret of her left-

wing past, says Berisha "is seen as the last bastion of Thatcherism". Last Wednesday, the Guardian published an article in which she sharply criticised the Albanian president (who had just been elected unopposed to a new five-year term), and what she called "continuing EU subservience to the Berisha regime". She noted that observers from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reported "serious irregularities" in last year's general election poll. The day after the article appeared, she faxed a statement from Stone's Helsinki group signed by Almond.

Almond dismissed the OSCE observers as "only one small group". He said in connection with the collapse of the pyramid schemes that the very fact that Albanians had any savings to lose was testimony to the "extraordinary changes" that had taken place in the country and that journalists had largely ignored the role of the opposition in the Populli pyramid scheme. "The role of the opposition in encouraging violent protests bordering on a *coup d'état* while talking the language of 'velvet revolution' to Western journalists ought to be investigated," said Almond.

Hibbert, who as a rising star in the FO years ago was denounced by Albanian nationalists as a communist, says the Amery-led lobby indulged in disgraceful tactics. "There were two camps because one camp based itself on a lie — everyone who opposed them was called a communist," he says. "Berisha is saying the same to this day. It is ridiculous." Berisha had crushed the centre parties and placed the judiciary under government control.

Meanwhile, the continuing attempt to blacken names raises question about hidden agendas and who is pulling the strings.

THE GUARDIAN

10.3.91

p. 9