

Prime Minister Edi Rama takes total control in Albania, but who can keep him in check?

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*Albania held parliamentary elections on 25 June, with the ruling Socialist Party led by Edi Rama winning a majority of seats. **Max Fras** gives his take on the outcome, arguing that while Rama's victory will be a positive development for Albania's EU accession aspirations, his now dominant position could pose a risk to the country's democratisation process.*



After [parliamentary elections in Albania on 25 June](#), the Socialist Party (PS) took power with an outright majority and the ability to form a single-party government – a development the country has not seen since 2001. The election presents a unique opportunity for a country that has been marred by political divisions and coalition in-fighting to pursue an ambitious agenda of reform and European integration.

On the other hand, the region's recent history abounds with 'strong and stable' leaders that squandered their mandate away through autocratic, anti-democratic and otherwise ill-conceived policies and actions – Macedonia's Nikola Gruevski, Serbia's Boris Tadic and Albania's own Sali Berisha are only a few examples.



Edi Rama, a former artist and Tirana mayor, [speaks](#) about his signature architectonic intervention in the Albanian capital – the multi-coloured houses. Credits: [TEDxThessaloniki](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0)

The opportunity for reform will only be realised if the new Albanian government and its charismatic prime minister, Edi Rama, are kept in check by institutions such as the judiciary and executive branches, as well as the opposition, media, civil society and the country's youth. External actors such as the EU and the United States could also exert significant positive influence on Albania's politics. Unfortunately, both internal and external actors face serious challenges and the Socialist Party's electoral victory is unlikely to make things better.

State institutions: judiciary and executive

Despite a recently passed package of judicial reforms, Albania's legal system is inefficient and its judiciary struggles to keep its own ranks clean, lacking basic capacity to oversee political actors.

Key political actors are just as weak. The newly elected president, Ilir Meta, was [tried for corruption and abuse of power](#) in 2011. Edi Rama himself referred to Meta as a '[representative of everything that is rotten in Albanian politics](#)' as recently as 2013. Although the Socialists' victory may accelerate legal reform, Rama's previous dealings with Meta indicate that the new government may seek further deals with LSI (Meta's party) and its founder – this would be a serious blow to institution-building as the president should be above party politics.

The opposition

Albania's opposition is in disarray. The Democratic Party (DP) has gone through a period of conflict and infighting that is bound to get worse after the electoral defeat. In Albania's strongly divided personality politics, Lulzim Basha's decision to push the old DP grandees aside could cost him his post. His earlier decision to abandon an [election boycott](#) was a smart move but the defeat might lead to the party's collapse.

Other opposition parties are in no better position. LSI's future may be bolstered by Meta's election – he has proven to be a highly resourceful party leader in the past and tends to look out for his own – but the party's electoral base has collapsed and lack of access to public posts may prove a hard test in the long run and may make the party dependent on the PS. Other parties, such as the Party for Justice, Integration and Unity (PDIU), whose own leader [lost his parliamentary seat](#), have little ability to control the government and are likely to face leadership challenges after the election.

Civil society and the media

Albania's civil society made significant advances throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, but its further development is obstructed by low social capital, poor performance of governmental actors resulting in overall mistrust in institutions, and a lack of financial support. As a result, civil society has not seen substantial progress for over a decade. The long-term consolidation of power and state resources in the hands of one party may prove a challenge for civil society growth and resilience, putting civil society pluralism at risk.

Albanian media face similar obstacles. Despite a general improvement in the legal environment and media transparency, producing material [critical of the government](#) and reporting on [corruption](#) remain dangerous and difficult tasks. The government having a stronger hand in parliament will increase pressure on public media and it is likely to strengthen pro-government bias in [public broadcasters](#).

The youth

Albania usually [tops the list of Europe's youngest societies](#) (a tight contest with neighbouring Kosovo), yet [youth participation remains very low at all levels](#). Both [demographic data](#) and [anecdotal evidence](#) on youth emigration from Albania provide little source for optimism – young people leave the country in droves. The recent [sharp rise in youth unemployment figures](#) and an increasing desire to emigrate show that the PS government has little to offer by way of a remedy. The fact that extremely low turnout in the most recent elections played into the government's favour is not conducive to electoral reform or the [de-politicisation of electoral bodies](#).

The European Union and the US

As the example of neighbouring Serbia shows, the EU is only too happy to solve the '[democracy vs. stability](#)' dilemma in favour of the latter and to co-operate with stable governments in the region, prioritising long-term goals over short-term deficiencies in the electoral system or the democratic process.

The emergence of a strong PS majority under Rama's leadership bodes well for the country's European integration process overall, but it makes EU oversight and direct involvement in strengthening political pluralism and bolstering civil society less likely. The US Balkan policy is going through a period of painful transition – lack of leadership at the State Department (a lack of deputy nominations) has resulted in uncoordinated responses as Washington and embassies speak with different voices. Despite relative power and influence (see recent political crises in Macedonia and Kosovo), the US cannot be expected to take the lead in reigning in Rama's power in the near future.

Where next?

In view of all of the above factors, great risks lie ahead for Albania. Mr Rama and the Socialist Party face few checks and balances and high social expectations that may prove hard to manage. Both the ruling party and government officials will have to show exceptional restraint, self-control and political maturity in implementing their policy plans in a way that takes into account the interests and stakes of all other political and social actors.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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