

CURRENTS OF PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT AND INTELLECTUAL DEBATES IN ALBANIA (1918-1939)

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Abstract

In the period between the two world wars, despite the economic and social backwardness in Albania, the cultural development moved forward and followed the historical course. Thanks to the efforts of the progressive forces and especially the intelligentsia in this period, a certain pluralistic climate was created in culture. The ideas and views of all currents appeared mainly in the periodical press (in newspapers and magazines of the time) and less in books, the publishing of which was difficult. One of the most prestigious currents of Albanian philosophical and sociological thought was that of “neo-Albanianism”, which came to life in the writings of Branko Merxhani. Another current of intellectuals, close to the first, was that of young people led by Ismet Toto, Nebil Çilka, Ferit Voskopola, Seit Qemali and others. In the beginning they were also called “neo-Albanians”, but later, elaborating their ideas against the old ones, from the ranks of the conservative beylers, they kept the name the young. The young ones, contrary to neo-Albanians, rooted for political activity and created a certain political doctrine. At the time of the proclamation of the Monarchy, there was a group of journalists and intellectuals who used their pen to justify Ahmet Zogu’s monarchy. The severe attacks on “the young” also helped in the system of their views. The “old” ideologues, led by Teki Selenica, Abdurrahman Dibra, Terenc Toçi and others, had sufficient space to expose their views.

Keywords: philosophical thought, intellectual debate, neo-Albanianism, political doctrine

Introduction

In the period between the two world wars, despite Albania’s socio-economic underdevelopment, cultural advancement progressed and followed its historical course. Albania had already established a stratum of intellectuals, with patriotic and progressive ideals, many of whom had graduated abroad. Thanks to the endeavors of the progressive forces, particularly the intellectuals, during this era, a specific pluralistic climate was fostered in the cultural realm. Despite arduous circumstances, philosophical, political and societal notions, folk culture, literary works and arts, science, education, publications and so forth got developed (Historia e popullit shqiptar, v. III (2007): 374- 375).

Ahmet Zogu undertook a series of reforms to lift the country out of its profound and manifold underdevelopment and steer it towards the West. He executed legal, economic, societal and cultural reforms that commenced to generate outcomes and instill a kind of stability in the life of Albanians. Nonetheless, three were the most vital and successful: the administrative reform, which established stability in the public order; legal reform, which replaced the old legal corpus inherited from the past; and educational reform, which consolidated the Albanian national school. Zogu’s most tangible attainment was ensuring political stability in the country. Historians claim that the most significant failure of King Zog was in the realm of economics. (B. Fischer (2010): 70-75)

The 20s and 30s of the 20th century were distinguished by a variety of original currents of political-social thought, which had not existed earlier. Several had a potent critical inclination against the state of affairs of the time and advocated for its radical alteration, along with the democratization of the country. The ideas and viewpoints of every current appeared predominantly in the periodical press (in newspapers and journals of

the time) and to a lesser degree in books, the publication of which was a challenge. Progressive Albanian thought endeavored to pave the way for social transformations. This intellectual and societal crusade preceded the political and societal war that was developed in Albania.

One of the most esteemed currents of Albanian philosophical and sociological thought was that of “neo-Albanianism,” which emerged in the works of Branko Merxhani and Vangjel Koço. The former was erudite, well-versed in European and global culture and philosophy, and proficient in several foreign languages. Vangjel Koça (Robert Elsie (2012): 231), was also known for his extensive culture.

Neo-Albanians articulated their opinions in the newspapers “Demokratia”, “Illyria”, “Minerva”, “Neoshqiptarizma” (A. Mile (2021): 96-101).

Branko himself established one of the most authoritative cultural institutions of that era, the magazine “Albanian endeavors” (1936-1939). Neo-Albanianism aimed all its arrows against the eastern model and advocated for a westernized Albania. However, it declared culture as its sole weapon. Every social and political conversion had to be carried out through culture. It considered the modern revolution (1917) as ruinous and a detrimental Bolshevik invention that was wrecking the world. No social reform could be implemented without modifying the mentality and morals of this country.

Merxhani was an elitist, and although he loved his people and felt sorry for it, he regarded it from above as unable to bring about change. Through the “Albanian endeavors” (Përprojekja shqiptare) and other means, Merxhani (Fjalori enciklopedik shqiptar (2009): 2038), made significant contributions to the dissemination of culture in Albania. He extensively published the viewpoints of rationalist philosophers and the works of the world’s most renowned authors. Petro Marko, Migjeni, and other writers published articles and literary pieces in this magazine (A. Mile (2021): 67-68).

Another current of intellectuals, close with the former, was the one of youth led by Ismet Toto, Nebil Chilka, Ferit Voskopola, Seit Qemali, and others. Initially, they were also referred to as “neo-Albanians,” but later, when they elaborated their ideas against the old ones, of the conservative Beylers’ ranks, they kept the name “the young.” The young intellectuals had newspapers such as “Arbëria,” “Rilindja e Arbërisë,” “Vullneti i Arbërisë,” “Illyria,” and others as a tribune. They began their battle against the old early on, who perceived them as usurpers of power and everything in Albania, and described them as degraded, without morals, without ideals, destroyers who had turned Albania into a ruin, the most backward country in Europe. The “old” generation vehemently reacted to their attacks.

Ahmet Zogu himself permitted this dispute to weaken the Beylers. Eventually, he disregarded the ideas that did not affect him. Unlike the neo-Albanians, the young were in favor of political activity in Albania. They also devised a specific political doctrine, with Ismet Toto being the main developer. The essence of this doctrine was the establishment of an “enlightened dictatorship” set by intellectuals, with Ahmet Zogu at the head.

The elitist standpoints, which portrayed the people as an amorphous body, with no role in the national history, were evident even among the “young.” In their struggle against Bolshevik ideas and class warfare, they encouraged social solidarity, which they believed would find support in Albanian nationalism, as a doctrine and a practical structure. During this time, Ismet Toto developed a heated dispute with the Catholic clergy also, through a brochure, in which he criticized religion as the “opium of the people” and the clergy as a regressive social force. The response of the Catholic clergy towards him was very harsh (Historia e popullit shqiptar, v. III (2007): 375- 377).

At the time of the proclamation of the monarchy, there was a group of journalists and intellectuals who vigorously employed their pen to defend and vindicate Ahmet Zogu's monarchy. Severe assaults on the “young” against the “old” also helped their system of viewpoints.

The “old” ideologues, led by Teki Selenica, Abdurrahman Dibra, Terenc Toçi, and others, had sufficient organs to express their views. The primary channel was the newspaper “Besa”, hence, the “old” ones were also referred to as “besa followers”. They also assumed the form of a pro-government political group. Other

media channels included the newspapers “Drita”, “Djersa e popullit”, “Vatra”, “Gazeta e Korçës”, “Dielli” by Faik Konica.

A central place in the ideology of the old was occupied by the cult and panegyrics for the monarchy of Ahmet Zog. They presented the monarchy as the savior of the nation, which had eradicated social unrest and anarchy, especially Bolshevism, and as a factor of progress and a bright future. The old ones declared war on social reforms that violated their order, as well as on any agrarian reform project, as they characterized all these reforms as “Bolshevik”. The old ones became strong defenders of the Italian - Albanian alliance, which they referred to as salvatory for Albania (Historia e popullit shqiptar, v. III (2007): 377- 379).

The Albanian Islamic doctrine placed significant emphasis on the issue of the relationship between the state and society. Society was considered as a union of people with shared duties and interests. The Albanian state was deemed a crucial achievement for the nation. Islamic followers understood that social progress was necessary and did not agree equally with everyone, both the rich and the poor. Everyone was equal before the law. The state's implementation of various reforms to transform the political-legal structure and create favorable circumstances for the development of bourgeois society was rightly comprehended by the Muslim community and were generally supported (G. Skura (2013): 14-17).

Another significant social and cultural issue was the attitude towards women and the institution of the family. This matter was extensively discussed during this period, and the emancipation of women was demanded. For Islamic culture, not only the national framework was important, but also the international one, the synchronization of the Islamic religion with modern times.

The synchronization with modern times was deemed as inherent in the Islamic doctrine, which had always evolved. To support this view, reference was made to the Qur'an, which encouraged the pursuit of knowledge. In the field of social activism, “Zani i Naltë” displayed immense civic courage by providing a platform for discussing and finding solutions to truly controversial concepts and practices that needed solutions at the time (V. Koka (1995): 18-19).

Conclusion

The 20s and 30s of the 20th century were distinguished by a variety of original currents of political-social thought, which had not existed earlier. Several had a potent critical inclination against the state of affairs of the time and advocated for its radical alteration, along with the democratization of the country.

Ahmet Zogu undertook a series of reforms to lift the country out of its profound and manifold underdevelopment and steer it towards the West.

One of the most esteemed currents of Albanian philosophical and sociological thought was that of “neo-Albanianism,”. Neo-Albanianism aimed all its arrows against the eastern model and advocated for a westernized Albania.

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