

Looking toward the 2012 Centennial

By Stephen Schwartz

The Albanian people stand at the threshold of their first centennial of independence as a modern nation. The year 2012 will be the hundredth since the raising of the red-and-black double-headed eagle of Skenderbeu in Vlorë, by a band of patriots led by Ismail Qemali, known to the Turkish court as Ismail Kemal Bey.

Albanians represent, as has been observed elsewhere, both the oldest and the youngest European nation. The Albanian ethnos and its Illyrian

forebears have occupied the Western Balkans since the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans. But the Albanians were later subjugated by the Ottoman empire, for half a millennium. Yet while the majority of Albanians became Muslim and officially accepted the authority of the Sultan, their ardent sense of national identity was not submerged in the imperial social system. The Albanian language, customary law (kanun), and clan and family relationships remained intact throughout the period of Turkish domina-

tion. Paradoxically, notwithstanding their strength and communal development, Albanian traditions and culture were unknown, and to a great extent remain obscure, to outsiders.

Many Albanians served the Ottomans loyally and bravely, but the whole people learned by the late 19th century that the Turkish regime would not grant Albanians the rights they desired, particularly that of education in their own language. The campaign for Albania's national freedom gained force with

the founding of the League of Prizren in 1878, led by Bektashi Sufis including the distinguished Frashëri brothers, who excelled as Albanian patriots and Ottoman enlighteners. The effort benefited from the participation of the Catholic figure Pashko Vasa, and that of numerous local Muslim dignitaries. Thirty years later, in 1908, the Manastir Alphabet Congress fixed the written form of the Albanian language, under the guidance of outstanding Catholic intellectuals exemplified by At Gjergj Fishta, At Ndre Mjeda, and Luigj Gurakuqi, Muslims such as Mit'hat Frashëri, and the female educator Parashqevi Qiriazi.

In 2012, all Albanian hearts, as well as those of the friends of the Albanian people, will be turned to Vlorë and the great event to be commemorated there. In the meanwhile, the Albanians face other challenges that reproduce the disputes of the past. If independent Albania is young at 100 years, free Kosova is a child, having gained independence in 2008. Tension remains focused on the Kosova-Serbia border north of Mitrovica, while the Albanian-majority areas of Preshevë-Medvegja-Bujanovc in south Serbia, and the eastern district of the Serbian Sanxhak, as well as Ulqin in Montenegro, Western Macedonia, and Çamëria, resemble lost cousins.

Serbia refuses to accept the independence of Kosova – notwithstanding diplomatic recognition granted by majorities of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Motivated by this intransigence, Serbian agitators interfere across Kosova's northern frontier, obstructing the establishment of border and customs posts along the demarcation line. Inside northern Kosova, Serbian "parallel structures" harass Albanians attempting to rebuild their homes, with fatalities recorded among both ethnicities. Although ignored by global media, Kosova's northern edge is the most dangerous place in the Balkans and perhaps in the whole of Europe at present.

Vetëvendosje (Self-Determination), the libertarian revolutionary movement founded by Kosova activist Albin Kurti, is now represented in the Kuvendi i Kosovës (Kosova Parliament). Vetëvendosje comes to the Kuvend as a political party, with 12 deputies and two allied members from the Lëvizja për Bashkim (Movement for Unity [of Kosova and Albania], formerly the Lëvizja Kombëtare për Çlirimin e Kosovës [LKÇK – National Movement for the Liberation of Kosova]). Vetëvendosje has based its appeal to the Kosova public on the charismatic reputation of Kurti, as well as the movement's leading role in demanding secure borders and its opposition to the persistent involvement in Kosova's internal affairs of international agencies such as the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX). But Vetëvendosje's platform in the December 2010 parliamentary elections emphasized its call for

Kosova's political fusion with Albania, and its demand that Article 1.3 of the Kosova Constitution, which prohibits Kosova's union with any other state, be repealed.

Serbian "parallel structures," at the time of this writing (November 11), had erected barricades at the Leposaviq road to the Jarinjë border crossing and continued to block traffic routes at Zupc, Zvecane and Jagnjenicë. Following an incident in the Mitrovica neighborhood of Kroi i Vitakut on November 9, in which an apparent attempted burglary resulted in the death of a Serb and injury to two more, Vetëvendosje denounced the killing of civilians. But Vetëvendosje noted that the Kosovar jurisdictional court in northern Mitrovica had been forcibly closed by Serbs, leaving the Albanian residents of the area at "the mercy of parallel structures and... forced to organize their own security... sometimes even with arms. They would not have done so if they were protected by (Kosova) institutions... (I)nternational security missions are present only symbolically. Such incidents are always used by Serbia."

In an interview with Kurti in Prishtina earlier in 2011, I was told how participation in parliamentary work has changed the character of Vetëvendosje. As he has been transformed from a philosopher and public intellectual into a political leader, Kurti has faced, in his own words, "an ocean of details. The volume of work alone is a problem." Kurti added that failure in handling the small matters of government may cause worse losses than major issues might, for Vetëvendosje, its constituency, and its ideal public, which is the entire Albanian nation.

Kurti stated that in Kosova politics, gaining votes is less important than defending them. Thus, Vetëvendosje was credited with 12.69 percent of votes, but challenged the results as fraudulent. "There was a lot of multiple voting and ballot stuffing in the late hours" of voting day, on December 12, 2010, according to Kurti. He described the established political class as operating "like a thief in the night," and said that "in the past the politicians sought entry into the institutions to enrich themselves, while their goal is now to gain impunity and protect their wealth." In addition, some delegates seek immunity for past illegal deeds.

Claiming 27,000 supporters and 10,000 activists, Vetëvendosje has not allowed parliamentary status to diminish its profile as a public protest group. "Democracy should not be reduced to representative democracy," according to Kurti. "Once democracy is restricted to representation it becomes merely procedural." Vetëvendosje organizes strikes, demonstrations, and other forms of direct and participatory intervention in political life. A boycott on commerce with Serbia has long been central to Vetëvendosje's activities.

For those like me who have observed Kurti and Vetëvendosje for years, it would be superfluous to



Monument of Ismail Qemali at the Albanian National History Museum in Tirana. The year 2012 will be the hundredth since the raising of the red-and-black double-headed eagle of Skenderbeu in Vlorë, by a band of patriots led by Ismail Qemali.



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compare his and his movement's militancy with the civic advocacy visible in the now-fading "Arab Spring" and in the conservative Tea Party and leftist Occupy movements in the U.S. and, in the last case, other Western countries. Vetëvendosje honed its mass mobilization tactics when the Arab lands, the U.S., and Western Europe were still anesthetized by authoritarianism in countries like Egypt, and by an illusory economic boom in the developed states. Kosova was ignored. Now that the rest of the world is following a similar course as that of Vetëvendosje, unfortunately, Kosova continues to be left out of the global media and political discourse, notwithstanding that Kurti and Vetëvendosje provide an admirable example of how to make dissent effective through strong bonds with ordinary people. Unlike the Occupy movements, Vetëvendosje has always had clear programmatic aims and an organizational base deep within the Kosovars, and its methods are mobile, avoiding the trap of ongoing confrontations at specific places.

In Vetëvendosje Newsletter number 275, issued on November 4, 2011, Shpend Ahmeti and Dardan Sejdiu analyzed the Kosova budget, warning, "the 2012 budget, as with the 2011 budget, is based on risky sources of income that are not guaranteed, and which could bring Kosova to a fiscal crisis." According to Vetëvendosje, money promised Kosova by the International Monetary Fund in 2011 will not be realized, and the European Commission has provided no funding for Kosova in 2012. "The rhetoric of this Government and the numbers which it presents, are inconsistent. The numbers indicate an economy based on customs income – the import of goods and export of our money," Ahmeti and Sejdiu reported. This makes the security of the northern frontier, where customs are collected, as well as trade agreements with Kosova's neighbors and partners, especially significant, aside from the priority of border integrity as an aspect of sovereignty.

Under the current administration, led by the Partia Demokratike e Kosovës (PDK or Democratic Party of Kosova) and prime minister Hashim Thaçi, according to Ahmeti, budget expenditures for construction, and especially for highway building, amount to 12 times that allocated for other projects. This includes a payment of Euros (€) 240 million, which Vetëvendosje denounced as a "blank check," to Bechtel & Enka (a U.S.-Turkish partnership) for the Kosova section of the new motorway from the Albanian Adriatic port of Durrës through Morina on the Kosova-Albania border to Arllat in Glogovc, rather than all the way to the Merdare crossing at the Serbian border, as was intended. Ahmeti also argued that "In the Ministry of Education about (€)24 million will be spent on constructing 30 schools. Up to now, building schools has not affected an improvement in the quality of education. And, almost all capital projects in other ministries are in buildings. A palace of justice will be built, a new ministry – all buildings the effect of which on economic development is minimal. This is a budget of personal profit, because all capital projects are

projects which make possible massive personal profit, corruption and a lack of transparency and there are no projects which will increase economic development. I remind you that a promise given by Prime Minister Thaçi... was that the agriculture budget would be 3% of the budget and it is not. According to this budget, 3% is about 45 million Euros, and this is not allocated to the Ministry of Agriculture this year or in future years."

In his interview with me, Kurti criticized Kosova's political class for lacking vitality except when changing their positions, and, by contrast, emphasized that Vetëvendosje, although stubborn in its principles, cultivates political dynamism. Its parliamentary deputies receive the standard monthly salary of €1,500, of which they donate half to the movement. Meanwhile the average wage of a Kosovar worker hovers around €200, or about twice what it was in 2001. "Members of parliament should not view their political work as a profession," according to Kurti. Vetëvendosje deputies to the parliament do not use the jeeps and bodyguards provided to members of the legislature, perquisites that Kurti condemned for "distancing the representatives from the people."

Vetëvendosje's leader is also concerned about the poor character of the U.S.-NATO-Kosova alliance. "The alliance is technical and financial rather than national and strategic," according to Kurti, who emphasized Kosova's need for "national-strategic alliances." Sustaining Kosova statehood requires "democracy, but also the two elements still lacking: a defense force and economic development. In Kosova, capital circulates but does not accumulate" – that is, money comes into the country but does not increase the income of the populace. "There are roads and petrol stations everywhere but no factories," Kurti pointed out. "It is a desert of asphalt." Laughing, the Kosovar intellectual whose sense of post-modernist irony is one of his best-known characteristics suggested, "maybe we are supposed to all live in vans and be constantly travelling."

Comparing Kosova with its troubled near-neighbor Greece, which has led the European Community to the edge of collapse by its profligate spending and uncontrollable tax evasion, Kurti observed, "Greece is an abnormal country but is treated as a normal country; Kosova is a normal country but is treated as abnormal." Kurti continued, "conflict resolution has been replaced by conflict management, similar to intensive care in a hospital." With the coming of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK), which has governed the republic since the end of the Kosova Liberation War in 1999, Kosova "left the Serbian prison and entered the European hospital. Prison guards were replaced by doctors and nurses." But, Kurti said, the time has come for Kosova to be released from hospital.

The Albanian nation, then, requires permanent vigilance by its people and their friends, to avoid repetition of its past episodes of sacrifice – under the Ottomans, the monarchist Serbs, and Slavic Communism. For the Bektashi Sufis who make up a large share of the Albanians, Dita e Flamurit, on 28th November, will precede by only a week the 5th of Muharram in the Islamic lunar calendar, bringing the Ashura observance or Matem, recalling the martyrdom of Imam Husayn at Karbala in Iraq, 1,331 years ago. Ashu-



Newborn obelisk, revealed in Kosova, on the day it declared independence. If independent Albania is young at 100 years, free Kosova is a child, having gained independence in 2008.



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ra will be held on December 6 at the Kryegjyshata or Supreme World Headquarters of the Bektashis in Tirana, and on December 10 at the First Bektashi Teqe in America, at Taylor, Mich., founded by the blessed Baba Rexheb Beqiri, may his mystery be sanctified.

The inspired pen of Naim Frashëri and the devotion of the Bektashis have made the virtues of Imam Husayn, particularly his dedication to respect for the popular will, objects of emulation for Albanians, in embodying the universal, unending struggle for human freedom and reconciliation. In the year 2011, Vehbi Bajrami, publisher and managing editor of *Illyria*, cooperated with the Center for Islamic Pluralism, of which I am Executive Director, in producing *My Visit to the Holy Land*, a unique and courageous account of Vehbi's trip to Israel, sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, in 2008. *Illyria* also worked

with CIP and AJC in making possible a joint Jewish-Christian-Muslim interfaith observance in New York on the 10th anniversary of the atrocities of September 11, 2001. *Illyria* and the Albanian-Americans have thus contributed to improved communication between American Jews and American Muslims. This risky but fruitful perspective unites the meaning of Dita e Flamurit and of Matem.

The Bektashis have stood out for their commitment to positive cooperation between the different religious believers that make up the Albanian nation. In Kosova, however, a serious confrontation has emerged lately between radical Islamist ideologues and the majority of moderate Muslims. Extremist Muslim rhetoric threatens the good relations between Albanian Muslims and Catholics – two of the main spiritual bodies on which Albanian independence depended, beginning

with the League of Prizren and continuing through the Liberation War. Unexpectedly, Turkey under the neo-fundamentalist government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan has also reappeared as a factor penetrating the Balkan region, on the pretext of its past influence there, while strengthening Islamist pretensions and threatening the Albanian national cause.

All our communities – American, Albanian, Kosovar, Macedonian, Bektashi, Sunni Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish, and non-religious – must continue reinforcement of moderation and repudiation of radicalism in religion. Albanians and their friends have no reason to forget the lessons taught by earlier battles for the dignity of the nation. Much changes, but the intrigues and assaults that endanger Albanian freedom remain. In 2012, let us all face them together.