

Kosovo: the Background and Current Situation

Rigels Halili

Rigels Halili was born in Albania. He has studied cultural anthropology and international relations. He is currently the Alex Nash Fellow in Albanian Studies at School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London, and also teaches Albanian culture and language at the University of Warsaw.

The crucial date for understanding the Kosovo situation is not in medieval times but 1878. By the 1870s the Ottoman Empire was clearly disintegrating, and the Eastern Question was high on the agenda of the western powers, including prominently Great Britain. Although the origins of Albanian nationalism can be traced back a few decades earlier, it was only during the 1860s and 1870s that Albanian intellectuals made clear demands on a nationalistic basis. The Albanians were afraid that they would lose their Albanian-populated lands to the other emerging Balkan states. Albanian leaders formed the League of Prizren in 1878 to press for territorial autonomy and integrity.

Kosovo and Northern Albania were in the main focus of the Albanian nationalist movement during the second half of the nineteenth century because they were under threat from the territorial aspirations of Serbia and Montenegro. Serbia's aspirations towards Bosnia and Herzegovina were thwarted by the Austrian annexation of that province in October 1908, and the Serbs then focused their attention on Kosovo for expansion. In the First Balkan War (1912-13) Serbia, Montenegro and Greece laid claim to Albanian lands, and the Albanians declared independence. In 1913 the conference of ambassadors of the Great Powers in London granted Kosovo to Serbia and Çameria to Greece. In Serbia proper this was seen as the liberation of Kosovo from the Muslims. From that time Albanians in Kosovo, who were treated as Muslims, were encouraged to leave.

Albanian irredentism within Yugoslavia was encouraged by the Albanian diaspora from abroad. During the Second World War the situation in Kosovo changed radically. North Kosovo became part of the German Reich; the main part of Kosovo was under Italian rule and treated as part of Albania. From 1941 the victims became the Serbs living there: according to various sources an estimated number of Serbs ranging from 10,000 to 50,000 were forced to leave for Serbia proper.

At the end of the Second World War Kosovo became an autonomous region of Serbia. Hoxha and Tito met in 1945. Tito promised Hoxha that Kosovo would go back to Albania at some point. But after the breach between Tito

and Stalin in 1948 the situation of the Albanians in Kosovo deteriorated rapidly. Between 1948 to 1952/53 hundreds of Albanians were killed.

The situation of the Albanian population remained very bad up to 1966, when Aleksandar Ranković, the head of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Yugoslavia, fell from power.

In November 1968 there were huge demonstrations by young people in Kosovo, seeking for Kosovo to become one of the constituent republics of Yugoslavia. There was an element of influence from Albania, in the form of Albanian irredentism, although it was marginal at that point. Tito decided to abandon the centralising model and more autonomy was given to Kosovo and Metohija. According to the constitution of 1974 the region was renamed the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and gained the status of federative part of Yugoslavia, but connected with the Republic of Serbia. In the 1970s, for the first time, Albanians felt free as part of the Yugoslav state, and their cultural identity and heritage were openly cherished. Cultural activity in literature and the sciences was very important. Many of the leaders of the 1990s were educated at that time.

The situation changed again in 1981. The economic situation was very bad: Kosovo was the least developed area in Yugoslavia and unemployment was 40-50 per cent, among a very young population. Serbians complained about the high birth rate among the Albanians; but the growth in the rate of population among the Serbians was almost as great, just less noticeable since Serbs were moving to urban areas or to other parts of Yugoslavia, while the Albanians remained rural. In spring 1981 students demonstrated in Kosovo, asking for better conditions. Yugoslav authorities described the demonstration in terms of irredentism or even counterrevolution. Albania was accused of exacerbating the situation, although there is no evidence for this. Serbian nationalist feeling grew in response.

In 1989, under *Milošević*, the autonomy of Kosovo was drastically reduced. In the same year Ibrahim Rugova created the Democratic League of Kosovo. The Albanians were aware that they could not resort to violence as the Croats had done, and Rugova followed peaceful policies reminiscent of those of Gandhi. In 1991 the Republic of Kosovo was declared, but it was recognised only by Albania and no other country. Between 1991 and 1999 a dual administrative system functioned, an official Serb-dominated one and a semi-legal Albanian-dominated one. Although there were reports of human rights abuses in Kosovo it did not form part of the 1995 Dayton Agreement. Separatist groups then resorted to violence. The last negotiations between Albanians and

Serbs were in 1996-97. The Kosova Liberation Army (KLA) came to the fore: its first actions were in 1993.

There was war between Serbia and the KLA from 1998 to 1999. NATO intervention changed the situation radically, putting a stop to massive deportation of Albanians. Albanians were returning in summer 1999, and Serbs fearing Albanian revenge started deliberately leaving; many were indeed forced to do so. Almost all Muslim religious buildings were destroyed; when the Albanians came back Orthodox churches were destroyed too. The religious element is thus present in the conflict, but it is not central: we should remember that there are many Catholic Albanians in Kosovo too.

The political status of Kosovo changed in 1999, when it was taken over by UN administration. In 2000 and 2002 local government structures were created, but controlled by UNMIK (the UN Mission in Kosovo). From 2002 there were discussions about Kosovo's future. The UN Resolution 1244 took a double position, stating that Kosovo was an integral part of Yugoslavia, but at the same time opting for negotiations over the final status of the province and a referendum within a period of three years. This referendum never took place. Instead, during the negotiations between 2004 and 2006 Serbia was prepared to grant more autonomy to Kosovo but not independence, while the Albanians said independence was not negotiable.

Kosovo declared its independence in 2008. It was not recognised by Serbia, nor by Spain, Romania, Slovakia, Cyprus and Greece within the EU, and other countries which were worried about similar movements for regional independence in their own countries.

Now Kosovo is more like a normal state, although the UN still has control of aspects of it. There is a new body under the EU, called EULEX, to set up a judicial system and look after the rights of minorities. The policy of the Kosovo government has been not to create an Albanian state but a multiethnic state. The Serb minority (5 per cent) has 25 per cent of the seats in parliament. Northern Kosovo, added to Kosovo in 1945, is mostly populated by Serbs. Serbia is using this part of Kosovo to destabilise the situation, and recently there have been riots there.

There are grounds for optimism about the future, however. The Kosovo government and people seem to have the will to move forward and solve economic and social problems. There have been more free elections in Kosovo than in Albania and Serbia during the postcommunist period. The prospect of open conflict with Serbia remains, however. One recommendation would be that the international community should not leave Kosovo closed, but give young people from there, who form a large proportion of the population, the opportunity to work abroad.

