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written press in Albania is twofold. On one side, it is protecting Islam in Albania from foreign cultural forces trying to tarnish its image, and on the other, it is combating extremist movements which under the pretext of serving Islam are causing all sorts of religious divisions among the Muslims of Albania.

One major shortcoming of the Albanian Islamic press is a great lack of coordination among its various voices. This lack of coordination is hindering the rise of a unified and dearly needed strategy to counter media attacks on Islam by some Albanian extremist secular media outlets. It is of great importance that the various voices of Islamic media in Albania be more supportive of each other so they can put together a single strategy

to enhance the power of Muslim voice in Albania. Moreover, the Albanian Islamic media landscape needs to build more audio-visual power to spread the teachings of Islam among Albanians. Although over 70% of Albanians are Muslims, most of radio and television stations in Albania belong to Orthodox and Catholic groups. Currently there are three well-funded Christian radio stations in Albania (two belong to Catholic Albanians and one to Orthodox Albanians), while there is only one Islamic radio station. I believe, strengthening the Muslim voice in Albania through more audio-visual power would greatly serve the cause of spreading the teachings of Islam, not only in Albania, but also in the surrounding countries of the Balkan area.

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escalated again. Albanian Media tried to portray every Albanian Muslim as a potential member of terrorist networks. Unfair and malicious cheap propaganda became viciously engaged in associating Islam to terrorism in an effort to tarnish the image of a peaceful religion. While the level of this type of propaganda has subsided for a while, we could see it making a come back with the phenomenon of the “Arab Spring” when media reports started to focus on the violent side of this phenomenon as war, anarchy and backwardness in the Arab world. The main message these media outlets were trying to maliciously convey to the Albanian public was that nothing positive could be expected from the Arab World. Arab countries could only export violence, terrorism, gender inequalities and violence against women, economic disparities, and all sorts of social ills.

Fortunately, there was, nevertheless, a good side to this time period too. We could witness some positive achievements in the domain of the Islamic written press in post communist Albania. In this respect, the resuming of the activities of the “Albanian Muslim Community” gave a real boost to Muslim constructive activism in the whole

country. In 1992, the first issue of the bi-weekly “Light of Islam” was published under a maxim inspired from the prophetic hadith “Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave”. The circulation of “Light of Islam” continued uninterrupted until today. Other Islamic magazines and periodicals were also being published and their circulation increased among Albanians. Even in some “secular” newspapers we could see a good level of interest in reporting cultural and religious activities taking place in the cities and towns of Albania. In addition, Islamic personalities and Islamic scholars are now making a more visible presence in the Albanian written press, and their contributions are no longer limited to strict matters of faith, but they are making their voices heard on all civil issues and problems of the Albanian society.

According to the researcher Ramiz Zekaj, the present Albanian Islamic written press is taking a humanistic attitude. It is following on a great tradition left by its predecessors :”Zani i Nalte”, i.e. “The loud voice” and “Kultura Islame, i.e “Islamic culture”, in order to strengthen national unity through a vision based on the teachings of the Quran. The mission of the Islamic

tendency toward free expression whether in the religious domain or in any other domain of life.

The third period (1991-2013-): Misuse of freedom of expression

The fall of communism has left Albania almost entirely irreligious. Through fear, the faith in God was severely marginalized even among those who once were practicing Muslims. Religious rituals lost even their pre-communist traditionalistic grip over Albanian public.

At this period, Albanian democracy had to face the challenge of the “spiritual soundness” of the Albanian people. A spiritually impoverished man cannot be democratic. Only a spiritually healthy citizen could afford to sacrifice his individualistic interests in order to contribute to burying the dark past and to building new hopes for the future of Albania. But, instead of engaging in a movement of cultural renaissance that would reinstate spirituality and civility among Albanians, the post-communist media, turned into a tool of organized, and often hidden private interests.

Post communist Albania became a favored target for various sects and religions. While in the pre-communist period 80% of the population of Albania were Mus-

lims, and the rest belonged to the Orthodox and Catholic faiths, in the 1990s we witnessed the “rush” of all sorts of foreign religious sects to Albania, exploiting the poverty and naivety of Albanians and often recruiting new members among the sons and daughters of Muslim families. Under the suspicious silence of media outlets, foreign evangelists opened churches illegally, erected crosses on national roads, and held religious seminaries in Albanian cities. At the same time, everything related to Islam continued to be viewed with great suspicion. Since the start of the post communist era, opposition press (newspapers such as “People’s Voice”, “Our Time”, “Social Democratic Alternative”, etc..) launched an opportunistic attack against Islam and Islamic organizations, spreading rumors that Muslim fundamentalists were entering Albania and recruiting Albanian youth, that Albanian women were starting to wear the veil, that Islamic organizations were organizing conferences, and that Albanian Muslims were developing anti-European tendencies. Following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the U.S. Albanian media campaigns against Islam, its symbols and its personalities

in the Arabic alphabet were destroyed under the pretext of being vestiges of backwardness. These measures culminated into the opening of the Albanian “Atheist Museum”. All these brutalities inflicted on Albanian Islam were guided by a spirit of vengeance and a communist worldview that believed any religious idea, symbol or practice, must be uprooted by means of state violence and replaced by “dialectical materialism”.

In that atmosphere of imposed fear, it was too costly to even think of founding an Islamic journal or publishing an article on any issue. Even the use of a religious word in any socio-cultural context could lead to jail. By February 6, 1967, no voice other than that of the communist party was tolerated in. Religion was officially labeled as the “opium of the people”, and the only God was the communist party. As a result, communist education created an inhuman and anti-national psychology among Albanians causing them to develop little sensitivity to national and religious issues. God was excluded from the public sphere as well as from family life, and material pragmatic attitudes began to dominate behavior in all public and private realms of life in Albania. Thus, communism spread

its ills to every cell of the Albanian society and managed to cultivate a new man (so called communist) guided by an atheistic, anti-religious spirit.

As was mentioned earlier, communist propaganda benefitted from illiteracy in Albania and from the fact that a large number of the Albanian population carried a traditionalistic view of Islam. In general, the religious knowledge of Albanian population was superficial and religion was mainly based on family heritage, where the practice of religious rites was modest and very few did know the textual significance of these rites or their positive consequences on the individual and society. (Shefik Osmani 1994: 55).

Written press with religious content had development opportunities in the Diaspora and in Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, where about three million Albanians resided with Muslims in the majority among them. Benefitting from some constitutional advantages, Albanian Muslims abroad managed to launch a number of publications, which kept the community alive in those countries. Inside Albania, the killing of every free spirit continued. The Albanian state continued its monopoly over the “media market” brutally silencing every

Albania and the Balkan region, in addition to significant support from the Albanian state which was trying to nationalize and restructure various religious communities. The number of associates, journalists and pundits who wrote on Islamic issues has increased by the day.

The flourishing of Islamic press met voices very opposed to Islam and its visibility in twentieth century Albania. As an example, during this period, a series of articles published by Tajar Zavalani, Ismet Tota and others, characterized the Islamic veil as a symbol of backwardness and called on Albanians to take the “developed West” as a model and avoid following the “backward Orient”, as the only way to become worthy citizens of Europe.

Writings against Islam were not the only or major problem during this time period. Since the majority of Albanians were illiterate and could neither read nor write, Islamic written press could only reach a limited readership, and its influence remained largely confined to the Albanian intelligentsia

By Translate German 1967, communism has completely won the battle against religion, and a totalitarian communist rule was established over Albania. Communists banned all religious press, closed

all religious schools, endowments, all religious seminaries and any intellectual activity with direct or indirect relation to religion. Even religious expressions or the mentioning of God in intellectual conversations were seen with suspicion and could lead to jail. Corporal punishment and physical violence was widely practiced against religious officials, and an atmosphere of terror was imposed over the entire Albanian population.

Second period (1954-1991-): Full intellectual blackout and rule by the means of state violence

The period of communist rule in Albania which lasted for more than four decades sieged all religious activities, banned by law the exercise of faith, persecuted and killed hundreds of religious officials and destroyed all objects of worship. Most of the mosques in Albania were either completely demolished or turned into warehouses, department stores, and even bars where the alcohol was served (the example of a mosque at the center of Durrës which was converted into a buffet bar). With the destruction of big mosques and town masjids, valuable religious documents, manuscripts, and other works of great historical importance written

“The Voice of the Nation” 1913-1914, “REFORMA” (Bektashi), “THE WAY OF THE TRUTH” (Shkodra, 1923), “The loud voice”, i.e. “Zani i Nalte”, (Periodic organ of the Albanian Muslim Community 1923-1938), “Takvim” (Shkodra 1937 to 1938), “NJERIU”, i.e. “The man” (1942-1944) and many others.

The Islamic written press first appeared as an independent sector in Albanian media in early XX century with the independence of Albania and the rise of the nation state. It reached a high level of maturity with the formation of the Albanian Muslim Community, as a self-administered institution with its own status. This event has caused the birth of a multiplicity of titles which brought more diversity to the intellectual arena in Albania by approaching Islam and Islamic issues through a multiplicity of perspectives related to several academic disciplines such as philosophy, morality, literature and sociology, and appealing to a wide readership. The academic quality of the intellectual contributions made by Albanian writers was high, since in these papers wrote the most important intellectuals of the time, with solid backgrounds in the field of culture and Islamic sciences. Among

theses writers were Ismail Maci, Isa Domni, Haki Sharofi, Haxhi Vehbi Dibra, Hafiz Ibrahim Dalli, Hafiz Ali Korca, Sali Vuciterni, Mehdi Frashëri, Mithat Frashëri (Lumo Skendo), Ismet Dibra, Ferid Vokopola etc. Such personalities, not only greatly contributed to the enlightenment of Albanian Muslims on issues of their religion, but also played an important role in the building of the Albanian state. Their interests and work were fully synchronized with the national interests of Albania and the major challenges it was facing as a new nation. In that period, Albanians did not differentiate between “religion” and “nation” as the “religious issue” was increasingly handled as inseparable from the “national issue”. Religion and nation were ONE. In that context, the contributions of Muslim scholars were widely accepted by Albanian historians and researchers regardless of their religious affiliations.

Following the independence of Albania, particularly in the 1920s, important efforts were deployed in order to give more structure and organization to Albanian Islam nationwide. These efforts were enhanced by major political changes that were taking place at the time in

sult, they tend to often emphasize the cultural and ritualistic sides of religious practice, such as celebrating religious holidays or abstaining from consuming alcohol or pork. The non-systematic and uninformed practice of Islamic religious rites and the cultural connotation of Islam that many Albanian Muslims do espouse, has turned them into potential targets for an army of Christian evangelists who have set shop in Albania following the collapse of the communist rule. For this purpose, Media has become one of the most effective means used to convert Muslims into Christianity and other religions.

As we observe how Albanian media portrays Islam and Islamic issues, one could easily see a clear polarization. Either media outlets zealously praising Islam and describing Muslims as peaceful and caring people, or media outlets grossly defaming Islam and portraying Albanian Muslims as fanatics and affiliated with terrorist networks. We see very few media outlets that take an objective middle position and present Islam and portray Albanian Muslims with an air of objectivity and moderation.

We believe that to understand the current state of the Albanian media and its polarized state, one

must first examine the history of this sector since its first formative years as well as its attitude towards the suffering and persecution faced by Albanian Muslims for many decades.

The first period in the history of the Albanian Media (1910-1945): The "Golden Age" of Islamic Press in Albania

During this period, outlets of written press such as newspapers and magazines were used effectively to propagate Islam, and establish the validity of its perspectives on all aspects of life in Albania, from matters related to the "private realm" such as issues of diet or dress code, to public realm issues such as Islamic economics, Islamic polity, or Islamic education. Although Islamic issues were among the many interests of various media outlets in this period, such as the very first Albanian newspaper "L'Albanese d'Italia", i.e. "The Albanian of Italy", first founded in 1848, a more serious coverage of Islamic issues could be found in more strictly religious newspapers and magazines such as the newspaper "Dielli" ("The Sun") founded in 1910, an interest to be continued and further cultivated by periodicals such as "HANA", "SEDA I MILET", i.e.

included but were not limited to “faith issues” ,philosophy, sociology, psychology, politics, economics as well as literature.. The second period extending from 1945 to 1991 was marked by state ideological extremism as well as massive repression campaigns against practicing Muslims. The communist government was engaged in an outright assault on religion, executing its officials, banning its institutions, and chasing its symbols out of the public sphere. Mosques were demolished or turned into warehouses, Latin scripts replaced Arabic ones, and all Islamic endowments were confiscated. Religion was described as the “opium of the people” and the communist party presented itself as the “new god” of modern Albania.

The third period extending from 1991 to 2013 was characterized by the fall of communism and the liberalization of media outlets. As government monopoly over media was ended in,, Islamic press started to come back and the plurality of media outlets has enhanced plurality of approaches to Islamic issues. Although the number of Islamic periodicals has significantly increased in the last few years, it should be mentioned, however, that the phenomenon of a free media market is still new in Albania, and did not produce much data that allows us to subject it to rigorous study. If this process stabilizes and extends in the future, researchers will be in a better position to study it.

The impact of media on the Albanian public is tremendous. Albanians who were historically unused to media pluralism are increasingly becoming a “media market”, consuming ideas coming to them from media outlets without showing much critical stand or searching into the organized interests behind media reporting. In this regard, media outlets do not only fulfill an informative function, but also a socializing one, which often turns into brainwashing and cheap propaganda. Moreover, various issues

related to Islam are communicated in very distorted ways in many Albanian media outlets, with the intention to tarnish the image of the Albanian Muslim population which has always constituted a numerical majority in Albania. According to official statistics, over 70% of the population belongs to the Muslim faith. Most of the Albanian Muslims are non-practicing of religious rites such as the five daily prayers or the paying of Zakat. Most Albanian Muslims simply see their Islam as a family tradition. As a re-

THE IMAGE OF ISLAM IN ALBANIAN MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Official statistics suggest that 70% of the Albanian population profess the religion of Islam. Over the years, various issues associated with this belief have been the focus of Albanian press and media. The object of this article is to describe Albanian media portrayal of Islam at the conjunction of major events and turning points of Albania's political history, which has been characterized –throughout the twentieth century- by a high level of ideological extremism, and political totalitarianism. In this respect, I intend to present the Image of Islam and Muslims in the Albanian written press by dividing Albanian modern history into three distinct “time periods”, based on the forms of that portrayal and its underlying assumptions. I believe this classification into “historical periods” is crucial to our understanding of the extent to which media outlets were at the service of government and its policies of repressing and marginalizing a religious majority and stripping it of all means of agency.

The first period extending from 1910 to 1945 was considered to be the “golden age” of Islamic scholarship in Albania. Albanian Muslim intellectuals were so resourceful in producing great intellectual texts which

صورة الإسلام في الإعلام الألباني

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ملخص

الأحداث الحاسمة والمفصلية في تاريخ ألبانيا السياسي، الذي تميز طوال القرن العشرين بالشمولية والطغيان الأيديولوجي بشكل لا مثيل له. وسوف أعرض صورة الإسلام في أجهزة الإعلام الألبانية استناداً إلى ثلاث مراحل تاريخية، أولها: الحقبة الممتدة من عام ١٩١٠ إلى ١٩٤٣م، التي تُعدُّ

تشير الإحصاءات الرسمية إلى أن نسبة معتقي الإسلام في ألبانيا تبلغ ٧٠٪ من إجمالي السكان. وطوال السنوات الماضية كانت القضايا الدينية المتصلة بالإسلام موضع اهتمام أجهزة الإعلام في هذا البلد. وتهدف هذه المقالة إلى وصف صورة الإسلام في الإعلام الألباني في إطار أهم

العصر الذهبي للإسلام وعلمائه في ألبانيا. ففي هذه الحقبة التي اتسمت بالازدهار أنتج المثقفون والمفكرون ذوو المرجعية الإسلامية عدداً من المؤلفات الثرية؛ ليس في مجال العقيدة فحسب؛ وإنما في سائر حقول المعرفة الفلسفية والاجتماعية وعلم النفس والسياسة والاقتصاد والعلوم الطبيعية، إلى جانب الآداب والفنون.

أما الحقبة الثانية الواقعة بين عامي ١٩٤٥ و١٩٩١م فقد اتسمت بالتسلط الشيوعي والتطرف الأيديولوجي وازدياد وتأثر قمع أي ممارسة دينية إسلامية. ذلك أن الحكم الشيوعي شن حرباً شعواء على الدين، وأعدم كثيراً من المسلمين، وحظر مؤسساتهم، وطارد رموزهم، وأغلق الباب في وجه أي نشاط ديني. ومن جانب آخر هدمت الحكومة دور العلم والمساجد وحولتها إلى مستودعات، وحظرت استخدام الحرف العربي في الكتابة واستبدلت به الحرف اللاتيني، وصادرت الأوقاف الإسلامية. باختصار: وُصِفَ الدين بأنه أفيون الشعب، ونُصِبَ الحزب الشيوعي لهاً بديلاً للشعب الألباني. وخلال الحقبة الثالثة؛ أي بين ١٩٩١ و٢٠١٣م؛ سقط النظام الشيوعي، وتم تحرير وسائل الإعلام بوضع حد لتدخل الدولة أو تملكها لأجهزته وقواته. وشهدت هذه المرحلة إعادة إحياء الصحف والمجلات الإسلامية، وسمح مناخ التعددية الإعلامية بتعددية مماثلة في طرح الرؤى والأفكار من

منطلقات إسلامية. وعلى الرغم من ارتفاع عدد المطبوعات الإسلامية في الوقت الحالي؛ إلا أنه من السابق لأوانه إجراء تقييم عميق لمسألة حرية الإعلام في ألبانيا؛ لحدائثة الظاهرة من جهة، وللافتقار إلى بيانات وإحصاءات ومعلومات كافية عنها من جهة أخرى. ولا شك في أن استقرار مناخ الحرية واستمراره سوف يتيح في المستقبل فرصة أكثر رحابة للباحثين والمهتمين بالشأن الإعلامي وحرية التعبير.

