State-organised Religion and Muslims’ Commitment to Democracy in Albania

AROLDA ELBASANI

Abstract
This article questions why, and indeed how, Muslims have committed to democratisation in post-communist Albania. The explanatory framework merges the theoretical insights of the moderation paradigm with the specific devices that characterise the post-communist religious field in investigating Muslims’ support for democracy. The empirical analysis draws on a within-case comparison of Muslims’ behaviour in three consequential stages of democratic transition—each marked by different configurations of institutional settings and ideological options, which we trace as potential explanations. The analysis suggests that institutional arrangements played the primary role. Yet, learning from the experience of dictatorship and from a ready pool of inherited Albanian-specific templates facilitated the consensual reclaiming of Islam in a local, pro-democratic, and pro-European manner.

Religious groups, committed to a sacred telos beyond the realm of politics, have long been perceived as suspicious or, at best, ambivalent actors of democratisation. Islam has been particularly targeted as a system of values that is not at ease with the democratic rules of competition and the necessary bargains that it takes to subject its truths to processes of free contestation. Certainly, democratisation attempts across the Muslim world encouraged a reassessment of the factors and processes that entice Islamic organisations to choose, and potentially commit to, democracy as the only game in town. Most empirical research, however, has drawn on these organisations’ short-term programmatic shifts, which correspond to swift democratic openings, usually in the context of the Middle East (Wickham 2004; Bellin 2008). Time-limited and region-specific accounts tend to miss the broader picture and expectations in relation to Muslims’ sustainable engagement with democracy in other contexts. Muslims’ support for democratisation across the post-communist Balkan countries, which have thus far been studied in the wake of nationalist and post-conflict paradigms, are particularly lacking in the broad research on Muslims’ choices for democracy.

The author is grateful for financial support to Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS), ReligioWest Project, and European Research Council (ERC grant agreement no 269860). The author would also like to thank the following individuals for their comments on various drafts of this article: Olivier Roy, Philippe Schmitter, Alfred Stepan, Cecilie Endresen, Olsi Jazexhi and Besnik Sinani.
This article investigates why and how Muslims have committed to democratisation in post-communist Albania. The Albanian state and the wider population consensually embraced democracy as the end goal of regime change and, since the early 1990s, moved to consolidate their democratic gains. Albania’s Muslim majority, for its part, has embraced the broad democratic ideals of the post-communist polity and continues to be actively engaged with evolving processes of democratic transformation. This is despite the changing institutional framework to manage nascent religious activities and the different, and sometimes conflictual, ideological solutions that have marked the revival of Islam since the initial democratic openings. What then explains the consistent support for democracy that Albanian Muslims expressed during different stages marked by changing institutional restrictions and ideological options? And how has their support adapted and altered according to these changing circumstances?

The theoretical framework used here merges insights from the moderation paradigm with the particular post-communist arrangements of the ‘religious field’ in explaining the choices and commitment to democratisation of Albanian Muslims. Research on the moderation of religious organisations, but also of other groups with anti-systemic claims, suggests that institutional opportunities and, alternatively, the leaders’ interpretations can encourage such organisations to tame their behaviour and play by the rules (Tezcur 2010; Schwedler 2011). The way in which institutions, interpretations, and legitimising arguments have developed in post-communist contexts, however, reflects the crucial role of the state in establishing, framing, and maintaining an organised ‘religious field’ (Epkenhans 2011; Elbasani & Roy 2015). This organised ‘field’ implies collaboration between state institutions, intellectual circles, and nationwide religious hierarchies in enforcing ‘official’ versions of Islam, which develop in tandem with government exigencies and policies. The way in which the institutions, interpretations, and legitimising sources that mark the organised religious field shape Muslims’ support for democracy, however, should be the subject of systematic research seeking to determine how these factors evolve and intermingle, and the priority each gains in explaining Muslims’ choices at different junctures of democratisation processes. Support for democracy here entails, (1) authoritative interpretations that merge Islamic principles with democratic ideals, and, (2) an actual organisational behaviour that lends itself to the advancement of democratisation.

Methodologically, we adopt a within-case comparison of the Albanian Muslims’ preferences for democracy in three consequential periods: the liberalisation of the communist dictatorship (1990–1992); the initial democratic transition (1992–1997); and the consolidation of democratic gains (1998–2014)—each marked by different configurations of institutional settings and ideological options. The within-case comparison allows us to ‘control’ alternative explanations of the behaviour of Albania’s Muslim community, and instead explore differences in the main explanatory factors—instiutions, interpretations, and sources—that characterise different periods as potential explanations (Gerring 2007, p. 139). The main unit of analysis is the Albanian Muslim Community (Komuniteti Mysliman i Shqiperise—AMC), the nationwide central organisation that is legally recognised by the state as the authority in charge of all administrative and spiritual issues pertinent to the Sunni community, and which serves as the main hub of their religious activities. The analysis also takes into account alternative external

1The 2011 census reports the breakdown of religious affiliations for Albania’s total population as follows: 57.12% Muslim; 10.11% Catholic; 6.8% Orthodox; 2.11% Bektashi; 0.11% Evangelist; 2.5% of citizens declare themselves atheists.
and internal Islamic movements but only to the extent they influence the position of the AMC and the institutional and ideological directions taken. The data used here include a wide range of primary sources: AMC statutes; official declarations; religious leaders’ memoirs; institutional documents; public statements; and interviews with relevant actors.

The argument proceeds in four parts. The first part summarises theoretical explanations and outlines the crucial role of the state in framing the organised religious sphere after the fall of communism. In the next three empirical parts, we analyse and contrast how the evolving institutions and interpretations have shaped the AMC’s support for democracy. The analysis demonstrates that Albania’s changing institutional structures, the crucial knot at the centre of the state-organised religious sphere, are the primary explanation for the political behaviour of local Muslims after the fall of communism. The AMC, as the official organisation of Albania’s Sunni community, has collaborated closely with the state in order to safeguard the boundaries of Islam, developing in tandem with the state’s policies and political vision. Its pro-democratic interpretations, moreover, are continuously fine-tuned in response to shifts within the organised religious field, which has become increasingly rational and hierarchical but also heavily controlled by the state. Yet, it is mechanisms of learning from the experience of dictatorship and the existence of an inherited pool of Albanian-specific arguments that have largely shaped the consensual reclaiming of Islam in a local, pro-democratic, and pro-European manner.

**Islam and support for democracy: the role of institutions, interpretations, and intellectual sources**

Answers as to why religious actors give up contested dimensions of their doctrinal ‘truths’, and accept to play by democratic rules, are usually embedded in one of two alternative approaches—the so-called ‘economic school of religious behaviour’, which emphasises the role of external institutions; and the ‘belief-oriented school’, which relates in turn to the importance of hard-to-change core religious teachings and interpretations thereof.

The economic school suggests that institutions that regulate the religious sphere, or specific forms and practices of secularism, provide the structure of opportunities on the basis of which religious groups calculate their choices and strategise about available options (Kalyvas 1996). Democratic openings, or inclusive arrangements, which allow previously excluded religious groups to compete for power with different alternatives, ‘entice’ them to rethink their choices and adjust their behaviour accordingly (Schwedler 2011, pp. 352–8). The rules of participation enable religious organisations to compete with other forces for market ‘shares’. At the same time, participation confronts them with at least two constraining mechanisms: the scrutiny of state institutions, and the scrutiny of potential followers (Bellin 2008, pp. 319–26). Opportunities and restraints of competition, thus, cajole religious groups into strategically diluting contested red-line theological issues that may otherwise get them in trouble with state authorities while alienating potential followers. Such necessary trade-offs represent a shift towards ‘centrist’ religious platforms, which are more at home with state legislative restrictions and general public preferences. The calculation of possible strategies in a given institutional structure also hinges on the strength of the organisational resources, which religious groups can mobilise in order to maximise their opportunities and evade constraints (Elbasani & Saatçioglu 2014, p. 464).
Critics of the economic school, however, argue that not all religious behaviour is strategically tuned to benefit from the structure of opportunities and constraints embedded in the institutional order. Evidence from Islamic movements, in particular, demonstrates that democratic openings and inclusive arrangements do not always trigger substantial revisions of religious programmes, and even less so behavioural commitment to democratic rules over time (Schwedler 2011, pp. 358–61). A recent branch of research taking stock of the limits of institutional explanations, has instead suggested that religious organisations’ primary commitments are to their ‘doctrinal principles’, and consequently, programmatic or behavioural support for democracy hinges on the role of democratic ideals in their respective teachings, and interpretations thereof (Wickham 2004, pp. 211–5; Tezcur 2010, p. 73). Ideals held by a community in relation to political authority, who has the right to exercise it and how, define the boundaries of justifiable political action (Philpott 2007). Commonly held ideals might not directly determine political choices but they predispose a community of believers to prefer certain options and disregard others (Collins 2007, pp. 70–3). What exactly constitutes this body of beliefs tends to vacillate between ancient formative teachings and the adjustments that religious authorities make to religious doctrine according to circumstances of time and space. Such amendments usually follow a process of personal or collective learning that takes place in circumstances of severe crises, frustrations, and change in the socio-political environment (Wickham 2004, pp. 214–5). The resulting interpretations that seek to reconcile religious doctrine with democratic aspirations, whether the result of inclusive institutional settings or authorities’ exposure to new ideals and life-changing experiences, connote an internal process of habituation and legitimisation of democratic norms that goes beyond merely rational-strategic motivations. It is these authoritative ideas merging formative religious doctrine and contemporary democratic principles that inspire the broad base of believers to act upon and pursue democracy as the ‘only game in town’.

The leaders’ interpretations of religious doctrine nonetheless require persuasive intellectual sources in order for such interpretations to take hold and convince the rank and file of the lay community (Tezcur 2010, p. 73). Historical legacies, be they institutional or ideological solutions from the past, provide familiar arguments that enjoy certain legitimacy among lay believers (Philpott 2007, p. 508). As Bellin suggests, past legacies furnish ‘institutional and ideological sources that Muslims may engage, and define the parameters of debate, ambition and strategies for political action’ (Bellin 2008, p. 335). Research into Islamic organisations confirmed that Islamic interpretations resonating in ‘a particular cultural and historical context’ are more successful in attracting the faithful and sustaining the organisation in the long term (Collins 2007, p. 74). While past legacies may infer varying solutions that religious leaders could delve into, the institutional and ideological bargains achieved during the creation of new, independent nation-states establish particularly enduring samples, which persist and are commonly invoked in ongoing processes of religious adaptation and change (Kuru 2007, p. 585).

**Post-communist state-organised religious ‘fields’**

The way in which institutions, ideas, and legacies evolve and intermingle to explain religious behaviour in post-communist settings reflects the crucial role of the state in managing and framing the organised religious ‘field’ (Epkenhans 2011, pp. 83–5). The former communist regimes were particularly keen to dominate the religious sphere and build up a ruthless
state apparatus in charge of appropriating all aspects of religious life (Hann 2006). This was usually accompanied by an intense campaign of indoctrination where the mechanisms of social control—mass organisations, the stern education system, a politically sponsored academia, and ruthless security services—worked side by side to inculcate people with the new ‘rational’ and ‘materialist’ outlook.

Succeeding post-communist regimes capitalised on the power of the state apparatus in order to construct and utilise religious symbols as an anchor of political legitimacy. In line with their democratic aspirations, all post-communist states have allocated new religious freedoms, while taking the lead in closely managing the emerging religious groups and activities. Institutionally, post-communist states have continued to ‘administer’ religious organisations by preserving a multi-tiered system of registrations and institutional controls, subject to unilaterally revocable conditions (Stan & Turcescu 2011). They have certainly treated their religious denominations according to their respective size and political weight but the use of state ‘muscle’ to discipline revived religious groups has ultimately remained the same. As Hann and Pelkmans suggest, ‘state policies towards religion have [only] shifted from disregard and hostility towards intensive co-option’ (Hann & Pelkmans 2009, p. 1519). The experience of the communist atheist modernisation project has thus bequeathed vestiges of interventionist, and occasionally hostile, state policies to the post-communist institutional format of managing faith, and particularly the contested role of Islam.

Some former ideological convictions have also spilled over into the post-communist re-imagining of the religious sphere. Communist-era intelligentsia—historians, linguists, ethnographers, artists, and scholars of Marxist ideology—who had been generously funded by the former regime, and supported by an overstaffed academy, have worked as transmission mechanisms for socialist-informed readings of faith (Khalid 2003, p. 579). Previously in charge of legitimising regimes’ animosity towards religion, this intelligentsia has recirculated in the post-communist machinery of knowledge reproduction, leading to the diffusion ‘of a school-mediated, academy supervised idiom’ (Gellner 1983, p. 140). The recirculation of communist-era ideals, together with at least some of the creators and trained guardians thereof, has contributed to setting stagnant parameters as to how the state, politics, and faith merge and separate in the historical and intellectual memories of most post-communist polities.

Government-sponsored, ‘official’ Islam—an organisational concept that refers to the creation of nationwide religious organisations operating under state supervision—has become an additional institutional tool in framing politically ‘correct’ interpretations of Islam. Headed by a chief mufti, governed by modern statutes and monitored by the state, central organisations hold a monopoly of authority in all administrative and spiritual affairs pertinent to their community of believers. The constitutional system awards them special privileges: representation in state institutions, public funds, state recognition, and legal protection. The religious ‘establishment’, in return, is expected to uphold a country’s specific local ‘tradition’ against undesirable expressions and influences (Ghodsee 2010, p. 19). Even in instances where power- or ideologically-driven rifts have split the centralised hierarchies, state authorities have intervened to remedy the conflicts and affirm the official interlocutors. By incorporating religious hierarchies into the institutional hold of the state, post-communist regimes have instituted an intricate relationship between politics and clergy, including the Islamic clergy: the sovereign retains the prerogative to intervene, ‘ulamā’ are supervised, and scholarship is
Institutional openings and mobilisation for democracy

Between 1990 and 1992, during the initial liberalisation of the Albanian communist dictatorship, newly founded Islamic groups and mounting anti-communist movements shared the same interest in the abrogation of the regime’s oppressive institutions and the expansion of negated human rights. The Albanian maverick regime, which until the very end remained loyal to Stalinist methods of repression, made use of harsh policies to realise its utopian vision of remaking society. The regime was particularly harsh in the field of religious control. Initial, cautious attacks on religious organisations—cuts to their financial sources, control of religious education, censorship of publications, and appointment of regime cronies in key positions of the religious hierarchies—gradually piled up and were followed by a massive purging the clergy, forceful banning of religious institutions, and prohibition of private worship (Basha 2000, pp. 163–7). The 1967 cultural revolution, modelled on China’s example, set the stage for one of the fiercest atheist campaigns in the communist bloc: all religious institutions were forbidden by law, religious infrastructure was demolished or converted to other uses (including as public toilets), surviving clergy were executed or imprisoned as ‘enemies of the people’, and performance of any religious ritual became a criminal offence, subject to penal sanction (Prifti 1978, p. 153).

These ostensibly ‘modernising’ policies gradually deprived all religious communities, including Albania’s Muslim majority, of the most essential rights to organise and practise their faiths. Some accounts suggest the survival of a few elementary rituals underground, whereas the remaining clergy continued to offer some minimal services in private (Basha 2000, p. 171). Such religious enclaves developed in opposition to the totalitarian language of the dictatorship and nourished anti-regime dissidence, most notably in Sunni urban strongholds, which had suffered particular socio-economic marginalisation under the regime (Clayer 2003, p. 294).

After decades of ruthless oppression, however, religious communities remained far too weak, decentralised, and probably fearful to directly challenge the communist dictatorship.

In the second half of 1990, as the Albanian regime started to loosen its grip on repressive atheist policies, believers took advantage of the emerging institutional openings and rallied alongside anti-communist movements. The lifting of the ban on religious practices in November 1990, particularly, created the necessary prerequisites for the organisation of the faithful, and the consequent mobilisation of anti-regime sentiments. The religious ceremonies and celebrations that took place immediately after the lifting of the ban on religious practice often evolved into well-attended events, demonstrating the widespread public dissatisfaction with the regime. This explosion of ‘religious fervour’ after decades of ruthless campaigning to educate good socialists was probably more an act of dissidence towards the regime than a simple declaration of faith (Trix 1995, p. 539). Mobilisation around booming religious gatherings and celebrations, on the other hand, sparked further rebellion, and lowered real or perceived costs of political action against the communist dictatorship. The first massive protests that took over the major cities in December 1990 occurred in exactly those urban Sunni strongholds, namely Shkoder, Durrës, and Kavaje, where the celebration of religious rituals had initiated the previous month.
The 1991 constitutional changes guaranteeing that ‘the state respects religious freedoms’, created new opportunities for the mobilisation of faith-based organisations. The inclusion of Muslim believers into a nationwide organisation operating in Tirana strengthened on the other hand the capacity of Albanian Muslims to engage in collective action against the collapsing regime. AMC leaders, all of them former prisoners and dissidents of the outgoing regime, used every opportunity to defame communists as kafir, a Quranic label for enemies of Islam. Sermons delivered during weekly prayers and annual celebrations included powerful pronouncements against the dictatorship. Communists were accused by Albania’s religious authorities of ‘shutting the door of the soul, conscience and memory of God’, while the collapse of communism was seen as a manifestation of God’s will ‘to help the damaged and defeat the damagers’ (Dizdari & Luli 2003, p. 5). The first issue of the AMC’s official periodical, the Islamic Light (Drita Islame) was published in January 1992 and included a pledge from Hafiz Sabri Koci, Albania’s Chief Mufti: ‘I do wish that in collaboration with all the organs of free press, we can take this country out of the terrible state it is in, and place it on the altar of the most civilised [democratic] nations’ (Dizdari & Luli 2003, p. 4). The emerging Sunni authorities, themselves victims of the regime, also paid tribute ‘to those hundreds of thousands who were killed, slain and tortured in the jails and the many extermination camps of the Communist Regime’ (Dizdari & Luli 2003, p. 6).

While the newly organised Sunni structures agitated against the regime, the country’s Muslim authorities bet on democracy, seeing it as ‘God’s wish’ that ‘religion can only flourish alongside the development and progress of a democratic Albania’ (Dizdari & Luli 2003, p. 6). Their support for democracy at the time was seemingly motivated by the perceived protection of religious rights under democratic regimes, indeed a matter of survival for such oppressed organisations. Interpretations legitimising democracy, therefore, eschewed any deep theological engagement with core doctrinal sources of Islam, to instead put forward the essential place that human rights occupy among Quranic ‘values’ and the broad ‘Islamic tradition’. The sermon that one of the members of the AMC hierarchy (who himself had suffered 23 years in prison) delivered during the 1991 laylat al-qadr prayer was typical of imams’ enthusiastic support for human rights: ‘The Quran assures people of the irreversible right to life, freedom and work, as well as of enjoying material and spiritual rights. Denial of these fundamental rights destroys human integrity, that of the community in general and of individuals in particular’ (Sytari 2011, pp. 56–7).

Besides their pro-democratic pronouncements, Albania’s new Islamic structures aligned themselves closely with anti-communist political movements, which since December 1990 had been organised under an umbrella organisation, the Democratic Party (Partia Demokratike—DP). The DP’s founding programme pledged respect for ‘freedoms of … belief and their exercise’, making it an obvious political partner for the struggle of the Islamic community for religious freedoms (Krasniqi 2014, p. 8). AMC leaders in fact joined anti-communist rallies, protested side by side with opposition leaders, expressed their gratitude for the DP’s struggles, and called upon believers to vote for the party (Jazexhi 2011). The DP, for its part, relied on Muslim authorities and believers to organise its activities: lay Muslims volunteered for the party, filled its local structures and crowded the rallies against communism (Jazexhi 2011, p. 12). The votes of Sunni strongholds in northern and central areas of the country were

---

2‘Law on Major Constitutional Provisions’, People’s Assembly of the Republic of Albania, article 7, 1991, available at: http://www.ipls.org/constitution/const91/contents.html, accessed 18 June 2014.
finally decisive in the DP’s enthusiastic victory during the first free elections, which, in 1992, ousted the communist regime.

Favourable political settings and defence of tradition

The political proximity that existed between the incoming DP majority and Islamic structures enabled Islamic life, and the foreign sources willing to come to its rescue, to boom during the initial period of Albania’s democratic transition. Between 1992 and 1997, the rotation of power opened up a new array of institutional opportunities for Islamic revival in Albania. The constitutional amendments of 1993 included a generous statement: ‘the right of thinking, conscience and faith are inviolable. Everyone is free to … express [their beliefs] individually or collectively in public or private life’. No further specifications or restrictions were put in place. Instead, a new set of institutional incentives boosted the preferential links between the new governing majority and Islamic structures, co-opting de facto the latter into the early governing project devised by the anti-communists. Soon after its instalment into power, the DP appointed an AMC representative to chair the new state institution charged with monitoring faith-based activities, the State Secretariat on Religion (Sekretariati Shteteror per Fene). Its vague statute and competences, moreover, allowed the Secretariat to mix ‘state functions’ with ‘religious interests’ but also to ‘exceed [its] competences’. In terms of forging connections between the government and Albania’s Islamic structures, the creation of a semi-official organisation, Kultura Islame (Islamic Culture—KI), by DP political exponents was even more important. Chaired by Bashkim Gazidede, then the powerful chair of the security services, the KI maintained formal links between the DP and AMC structures. It also served the government in establishing contacts with cash-rich Arab associations that showed willingness to invest in the country. As early as 1992, the Chair of DP and Albania’s newly elected president, Sali Berisha, wrote a letter to the then premier, Alexander Mexi, suggesting that the country’s inherited poverty could only be eradicated through foreign support, including aid from the wider Islamic world (Lakshman-Lepain 2002). Probably with this goal in mind, Berisha decreed soon after his election Albania’s full membership of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). The membership allowed the government formal access to rich Saudi investors, who were quick to come up with multi-million dollar credits for the economy as well as generous assistance towards the regeneration of Islam (Vickers & Pettifer 2000).

The lack of institutional mechanisms for the screening and surveillance of religious associations seeking to enter the country, meanwhile, opened the country up to all kinds of movements, activists, and missionaries from all parts of the world. As a study on that period puts it, ‘when the communist law was swept aside, but no new legal framework was put in place, Albania was invaded once again: by business prospectors, “advisors” …, observers and religious groups who came to recruit for their faiths’ (Young 1999, p. 5). Competition for the hearts and minds of post-atheist Albanians was particularly fierce in the context of Albania’s location in Europe, which made the Muslim majority a key target for diverse Islamic movements striving to spread their ‘message’ and networks across Europe. Some of the

---

3‘Për Një Shtojcë Në Ligjin Nr.7491, Datë 29.4.1991 “Për Dispozitat Kryesore Kushtetuese”’, article 18, Albanian Parliament, 31 March 1993, available at: http://licodu.cois.it/?p=367, accessed 30 June 2014.

4Author’s interview with anonymous state official, Tirana, 5 November 2010.

5Author’s interview with anonymous researcher and Muslim activist, Berlin, 17 January 2011.
best-funded Arab foundations, moreover, worked within a three-phased plan of Islamisation: the first phase of assistance was to lead to the promotion of pure Islamic values, which would then pave the way for the installation of an Islamic state (Othman 1993). The education of local ‘ulamā̀, elite scholars who could then correctly ‘coach’ the mass of believers, was at the core of this three-pronged Islamisation project: hundreds of Albanians were given scholarships to study at the best centres of Islamic theology, Quran courses proliferated everywhere, Islamic literature, periodicals, and numerous translations became available for free, and proselytisation-oriented social activities, mainly targeting the youth and the poor, sprang up even in remote areas of the country (Vickers & Pettifer 2000, pp. 100–9). Between 1992 and 1994, a single Arab foundation distributed three million copies of the Quran, a number that was higher than the total size of the population at the time. Albania’s membership of the OIC, and consequent lifting of visa requirements for all OIC nationals, facilitated the entry of Islamic missionaries; KI’s underground links with Arab associations enabled some of those missionaries to acquire expedited Albanian citizenship and reside in the country permanently (Vickers & Pettifer 2000; Lakshman-Lepain, 2002).

The AMC structures seized the opportunities that came with favourable state policies and the inflow of foreign funds.6 According to the first elected Chief Mufti, Hafiz Sabri Koci, ‘the democratic victory of 1990 created new chances [for the AMC] to connect with the world, develop new thinking, renew attempts to strengthen faith and discover religious morality’ (Dizdari & Luli 2003, p. 9). Given the widespread destruction of the communist period and the prevailing poverty, the rebuilding of religious infrastructure was almost entirely dependent upon foreign associations and funds. Unsurprisingly, the period between 1992 and 1998 saw the flourishing of AMC activities and the prompt appearance of a new Islamic public space: new infrastructure, including around 500 mosques and an entire Islamic education system, was built from scratch; new official publications and other services were launched; and an extensive net of social and humanitarian activities were developed (Jazexhi 2011, pp. 10–3). AMC’s 1993 founding statute formalised a centralised, all-encompassing mode of management of Islamic affairs, including its own monopoly on issuing binding decisions in relation to issues pertinent to the Sunni community, the management of religious endowments, the maintenance of religious infrastructure, the organisation of religious education, and the representation of Sunni believers in relevant public activities (AMC 1993). The variety of foreign sources of assistance, however, did not fit easily into the centralised model of management represented by the AMC. Many of the newly built mosques that were formally under AMC management, for example, were de facto under the control of the associations that had helped to build them (Lakshman-Lepain 2002). This was also the case with foreign-funded chains providing Islamic education, publications, and periodicals, as well as social activities.

The friction between domestic AMC structures and their foreign sponsors finally became apparent in their conflicting interpretations of the correct sources and practices of ‘true’ Islamic doctrine. In line with the Islamisation project and particular political agendas, at least some of the influential Arab sponsors that had entered the open ‘market’ of ideas in the early 1990s promoted the purification of Islam from local customs and practices. They

---

6 In the early 1990s, more than 90% of the AMC budget came from external sources. Aid from Islamic countries also amounted to around half of total foreign investment, and over 5% of the Albanian GDP (Lakshman-Lepain 2002, p. 49).
insisted on teaching local believers ‘pure’ salafi ideas, strict forms of behaviour and aggressive proselytisation strategies (Lakshman-Lepain 2002, pp. 44–5). The AMC leaders, most of them former employees of pre-communist Islamic structures, instead considered it a ‘sacred duty’ the upholding of ‘the national traditions inherited from their ancestors’ (Dizdari & Luli 2003, p. 5). Incoming ideas concerning the purification of tradition, therefore, set in motion an internal process of soul searching to find the most adequate doctrinal solutions for Albania’s new post-communist life. Past templates, synthesised in the so-called Albanian-specific ‘tradition’, came in handy to the extent that they furnished familiar solutions, which had moreover been successfully attempted during the formative experience of the Albanian independent state after 1912. The response of AMC’s vice-chief, Faik Hoxha, to the worries of the then Saudi Minister for Awqāf, about the negligent impact of Saudi finances in the country, sums up the AMC’s defence of tradition: ‘We do not need others to teach us faith. … We need assistance for the regeneration of our own faith’ (Sytari 2011, p. 46; emphasis added).

References to ‘tradition’ extol the modernisation reforms undertaken by the post-Ottoman Albanian state, in response to the ‘demands of the new European age’, especially during the period of relative stability that the country experienced between 1920 and 1939 (Clayer 2009). In the context of the state-led modernisation process, the nationwide Sunni organisation created in 1923—the official predecessor of the AMC—became the ‘hotbed’ for Muslims searching for progressive ideas appropriate to the country’s new ‘modern’ and especially ‘European’ times. The transformative experience of these reforms left official interpretations of Islam closely intertwined with issues of nation- and state-building as well as with the progress of European civilisation. The AMC, which in 1991 took over as the successor to the pre-communist Sunni organisation, has pledged to carry on this reformist legacy, transforming the ‘tradition’, or what was meant by tradition at different stages of the creation of the Albanian state, into the AMC’s official template for the recovery of Islam.

AMC leaders made extensive use of arguments that occupy a crucial place in the gamut of traditional choices, particularly those relating to ‘national unity’, ‘patriotism’, and ‘religious tolerance’ (Endresen 2012). These arguments worked well in gluing together an Albanian ‘nation’ from the different religious denominations—Sunni, Bektashi, Christian Catholic, and Christian Orthodox—that inhabited the country after independence. These gained the status of an indispensable legacy in Albanians’ collective ‘memory’, hence, tradition. Such arguments, which in the past aimed at forging national ‘unity’ and ‘harmony’, resurfaced as familiar and convincing sources for the AMC’s re-conceptualisation of Islam, particularly during the civil and political disorder that plagued the country from 1996 to 1997. Resurrecting tradition, the AMC 1993 statutes pledged to foster ‘love for religion … fatherland and the whole Albanian nation’ (AMC 1993, article 2). Sermons calling upon Albanians ‘to be tolerant and to be together for the good of the country and the people’ have dominated at crucial moments of socio-political conflict (Sytari 2011, p. 59). Remaining true to ‘tradition’, AMC leaders predicted that Albanian-specific Islam would help ‘to find human and brotherly stability’, as well as ‘to respect everyone’s rights and freedoms’, sending a message of unity amid the chaotic transition of the mid-1990s (Dizdari & Luli 2003).
The stringent structure of opportunities and consolidation of a national ‘Madhhab’

The rotation of power in 1997, together with the new regulatory framework adopted soon thereafter, reversed the tight connections between politics and Islam that had marked Albania’s initial transition. With the re-arrangement of the institutional framework, the religious playing field had become increasingly restrictive and state-supervised. The Constitution of 1998 elaborated in detail the new relationship between state and religion. Accordingly, the state is neutral on questions of belief, and recognises the equality of all religious communities. State and religious communities are also required to respect ‘the independence of each other’ but also to ‘work together for the good of each and all’.

This intrinsic collaboration is furthermore regulated by bilateral agreements, agreed between respective representatives, and ultimately ratified by the Albanian Parliament. Religious freedoms are elaborated at length in the chapter on individual rights which, however, makes it clear that ‘no one may be compelled … to take part or not in a religious community or in religious practices’. The new Committee of Cults (Komiteti Shtetëror i Kulteve), which replaced the Secretariat in 1999, was also re-conceptualised in order to ‘supervise religious affairs’ under the guidance of an impartial civil servant. The Non-Profit Organisation Law adopted in 2001 laid down precise guidelines for the registration of faith organisations, a process that automatically subjects them to court screening for compatibility with state legislation.

Besides the new, stringent institutional arrangements, the Albanian state has taken measures to strengthen its official religious interlocutors. The central organisations representing each of the four traditional communities enjoy a set of constitutionally recognised privileges. Accordingly, these are the only organisations that have the right to negotiate separate bilateral agreements with the state on behalf of their respective communities of believers. They are also the only religious organisations that benefit from state funds, have representatives in the Committee of Cults, and participate in state ceremonies. Such prerequisites formalised their official ‘monopoly’ on representing and managing the affairs of their respective communities.

Along with the imposition of new legal restrictions and mechanisms of state surveillance of religious activities, the incoming government initiated a campaign of scrutinising all Islamic ‘charities’ present in the country. By 1998, Albania featured in the list of countries providing ‘a safe and undisturbed refuge for Islamic terrorists’ (ICG 2009, p. 7). Different reports suggested that some of the foreign associations had utilised political links to develop illegal activities and to establish operative bases working for wider terrorist networks (Vickers & Pettifer 2000, pp. 106–7). Some of these associations were also involved in the unfolding conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, which embedded them into stronger, region-wide military structures. Government scrutiny of such associations, with the assistance of involved European and US anti-terrorist units, led, in August 1998, to the arrest of a suspected group of terrorists, the closure of some

---

7 Albanian Constitution, 1998, article 10, available at: http://www.ipls.org/services/kusht/cp1.html, accessed 18 June 2014.
8 Albanian Constitution, 1998, article 24, available at: http://www.ipls.org/services/kusht/cp1.html, accessed 18 June 2014.
9 ‘Për Krijimin e Komitetit Shtetëror Për Kultet’, Council of Ministers, No. 459, adopted on 23 September 1999, pp. 1–3, available at: http://kshk.gov.al/vkm-nr-459-date-23-9-1999/, accessed 15 December 2015.
10 ‘Për Organizatat Jofitimprimurëse’, Albanian Parliament, no. 8788, 7 May 2001, available at: http://shtetiweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Ligj_8788_07.05.2001OJQ.pdf, accessed 19 December 2015.
of the most active foundations operating in Tirana, and to the expulsion of related personnel (Vickers & Pettifer 2000, pp. 106–8). New arrests and expulsions also followed after the 9/11 attacks in the United States and, in 2004, after the killing of an AMC official, allegedly by radical groups. Distant bilateral relations with selected Islamic countries came finally to replace Albania’s close diplomatic and economic contacts with the Islamic world.

The state’s assault on the burgeoning Islamic networks contributed to shifting the tide of mainstream socio-political discourse towards the real or imagined ‘threat’ of Islam. After 1997, the political background of the new majority party, the Socialist Party (Partia Socialiste—SP), which had inherited some of the basis of the former communist organisation but also a core of intellectuals imbued with a rigidly atheist education, played its part in the emerging of a certain anti-Islamic tone in the general public discourse. The SP’s founding programme pledged respect for ‘religious freedoms’ as much as for the right ‘not to believe … and atheist propaganda’ (Krasniqi 2014). Mainstream intellectuals who had been educated during the communist era proved particularly active in articulating images of Islam as an obscure remnant of the Ottoman past, an almost ‘treacherous’ population that could never be successfully integrated into the country’s new ‘turn’ towards democracy and European integration (Suštarová 2006; Elbasani & Saaçioğlu 2014). Ismail Kadare, the widely-read Albanian novelist, for example, believes that, ‘the Albanian path to Europe should be taken without the baggage of Islam, which is not worth it, and only delays the arrival’ (Suštarová 2006, p. 265).

Albania’s anti-Islamic discourse is also well represented in public school textbooks, which teach future generations stories of Islamic fanaticism and backward Ottoman occupation, often reproducing communist-era images of ‘religious obscurantism’ (Jazexhi 2008). All too frequently, political debates revisit intellectuals’ inflammatory readings of Islam and its democratic role. In 2005, the Albanian president explained to academic audiences that ‘Albania is often considered as … a country of Muslim majority. [But] this is a very superficial reading of the reality. … Islam in Albania … [a]s a rule is a shallow religion’ (Moisiu 2005). All the while, political leaders across the political spectrum have forcefully reminded Muslims of the state-controlled framework for the recovery of faith: ‘From its very birth, the Albanian state has embraced laicity as a formula that incorporates the diverse interests of all Albanians and their ideal of coexistence. We all know that laicity is a necessary condition for harmony in multi-religious societies’ (Topi 2010). The state has also actively required the collaboration of the Muslim hierarchy:

These days when the Albanian society faces many challenges, we need to bring to the fore more than ever our indivisible soul and nationwide solidarity. I am sure that [central] religious organisations will provide their help in this regard, a contribution which relies on our traditional principles of love and tolerance for each other. (Drita Islame 2014)

The AMC has responded by re-dimensioning itself according to the new and stringent institutions. The first challenge was the reshuffling of its internal organisational structure. A new leadership profile was provided by the new Chief Mufti elected in 2004, Haxhi Sali Muca, a former engineer educated in the Czech Republic with only sparse religious education. His vision for the community consisted of improving its public image, consolidating its independent financing, modernising publications, updating the education curricula, and refreshing the Sunni hierarchy (AMC 2012). Soon thereafter, most Arab-educated students
of theology were replaced with social science graduates from Turkish universities. Turkish influences have consequently gained steam in influencing the revival of faith, with the Turkish Gülen movement managing five out of seven madrasas in the country as well as the Islamic university, Beder. Organisational statutes of 2002 and 2005 further consolidated the central authority of Chief Mufti and core executive organs near to him in governing the affairs of the community (AMC 2005). In line with the new legal restrictions, the revised statutes pledge respect for ‘the legislation of the Republic of Albania’ and require muftis to swear an oath both to the ‘Quran’ and to ‘Community statutes’ before taking the job (AMC 2005, article 8, 40).

The AMC’s next challenge was the consolidation of an Albanian-specific school of interpretations, capable of accommodating the new institutional and ideological pressures dominating the religious ‘field’. The reshuffled central hierarchy sees itself as the guardian of ‘the culture, tradition and characteristics of Albanian society’ (AMC 2013). The 2002 formalisation of the Hanafī Madhhab, which emphasises the role of human reason in the reading of Islamic principles, provides the clergy with the necessary Islamic jurisprudence tools to take the ‘Albanian reality’ into account (AMC 2013). The 2009 bilateral agreement between the AMC and the state entrenches the position of the former as an official intermediate between politics and faith. State authorities, for their part, take over to protect the AMC’s monopoly of authority ‘against any deformations, extremist tendencies, or other aggressive demonstrations in the spaces occupied by [its] believers’. The central Muslim hierarchy, in return, commits to respect state-imposed guidelines for the protection of ‘a democratic society, public security and third-party rights’. The official Islamic doctrine thus develops in parallel to the country’s socio-political expediencies and to consensual goals of transition—democratisation alongside European integration. In conforming to its role, the AMC pledges to ‘promote … democracy, human rights and the rule of law’, while its leaders pray for ‘the rise of Albania among the [European] nations ruled by liberty, justice and service to the people’ (Muca 2011). In his first protocol meeting with the Albanian president in March 2014, the newly-elected AMC Chief, Skender Bruçaj, reassured the president about ‘the positive role that the community will continue to play with regard to democratic developments in the country’ (Drita Islame, 2014).

Alternative movements—sections within the official hierarchy and parallel structures but also autonomous groups that operate within the scope of civil society—have increasingly challenged the close alliance between the Albanian state and the AMC. This division cuts across various institutional concerns and ideological convictions. The believers’ searches for faith but also the different alternatives on offer during the open market of religion that characterised the collapse of communism have unleashed diverse ways of practising Islam (Elbasani & Roy 2015a, 2015b). Accordingly, new forms of religiosity are less institutionalised, more heterogeneous, and open to new sources and channels of information. All the while, the ‘community’ of the faithful is scattered and not particularly concerned with unifying itself. Being effectively excluded from state privileges, alternative groupings have less incentive to

---

11Ligj Për Ratifikimin e “Marrëveshjes Ndërmjet Këshillit Të Ministrave Të Republikës Së Shqipërisë Dhe Komunitetit Musliman Të Shqipërisë Për Rregullimin e Marrëdhënimeve Të Ndërsjella’, Albanian Parliament, Nr.10 056, 22 January 2009, available at: http://licodu.cois.it/?p=118, accessed 30 June 2014.

12Deklaratë e Angazhimeve Morale të Përbashkëtë’, Tirana, 18 March 2005, available at: http://www.albasoul.com/vjeter/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=1697, accessed 15 December 2015.

13Author’s interview with anonymous believer and researcher, Berlin, 18 February 2011.
unite around or succumb to the official Islamic doctrine. Yet, they are also subject to similar institutional and learning mechanisms that have marked the development of an Albanian-specific Islam.

Emerging Islamic groups, although very diverse and heterogeneous, have all made use of the existing democratic rights—protests, petitions, public declarations, legal suits, and statutory irregularities—to make their claims in the public arena. Their primary demands have been for greater civil and political rights in accordance with democratic and European standards. As one such organisation puts it, ‘Albanian Muslims … are citizens devoted to the principles of democracy and human rights … [and] have a great need for the democratic liberties that the common [European] continent has built up over the years’.¹⁴ Most groupings, which are typically labelled ‘extremist’ by the official hierarchy, also make use of local idioms that are ‘acceptable to the country and contemporary context’, rather than advocating for ‘different’ or ‘alien’ ways of being Islamic.¹⁵ Unlike the official structures, however, they see Islam as merely a faith, and strive to make their religion more autonomous—politically, institutionally, as well as ideologically. For them, the return of Albanians from theological studies abroad, for example, rather than a rupture of tradition, is seen as a continuity of that tradition because the new graduates have mastered Islamic knowledge but also know ‘their people and country better than foreign missionaries’ (Sinani 2010). Thus far, both alternative and official groupings seem to agree on the usefulness of traditional templates for the recasting of Islam in an Albanian-specific, European, and democratic way. Yet, more research needs to be done in order to investigate the implications of the expanding Islamic network for the institutional and ideological bifurcation of Islam, and the seemingly consensual commitment to the values of democracy and European integration.

Conclusions

This article investigated why, and indeed how, the central organisation of Albania’s Muslim community has agitated for democracy despite the changing institutional structure of opportunities and ideological offers that constituted the organised religious field throughout the different stages of the post-communist transformation. The analytical framework focused on the role of the evolving institutions, interpretations, and legitimising sources that have marked the state-organised religious field since the fall of communism. The empirical analysis traced and compared the AMC’s commitment to democracy as the only game in town on account of both ideological adaptations and organisational support.

The empirical examination of the AMC confirms that the political choices of Islamic organisations, especially in post-authoritarian settings, are primarily driven by the institutional structure of opportunities and constraints, and changes thereto. The concept of the state-organised religious field, which highlights the domineering role of the state in managing the revival of Islamic life, is particularly helpful in explaining the AMC’s commitment to

¹⁴ ‘Miranda Vickers is Mistaken about Islam in Albania’, Muslim Forum of Albania, 13 November 2008, available at: http://www.forumimusliman.org/english/vickers.html, accessed 18 July 2014.
¹⁵ ‘Deklaratë e 41 imamëve të xhamive në vend’, Shekulli, 18 November, 2009, available at: http://www.arkivalajmeve.com/Deklarate-e-41-imameve-te-xhamive-ne-vend.352586/, accessed 15 December 2015.
democracy. The initial democratic openings enabled newly-organised Muslim structures to mobilise alongside the anti-communist umbrella organisation that challenged the communist dictatorship between 1990 and 1992. Favourable connections between the ruling majority and Islamic structures enabled the flourishing of Islamic activities but also of new foreign associations with competing ideas and projects regarding the future of the regime during the subsequent period (1992–1997). The stringent institutional controls imposed upon the revived Islamic structures after the rotation of power in 1997 have since reversed the tide of privileged state policies and encouraged a significant reshuffling of the AMC’s organisational outlook, in line with the state’s new policies and exigencies.

The post-communist state has also helped in outlining the ideological confines of the AMC’s interpretations, especially in light of the state’s increased focus in tackling radicalised elements within the Muslim community since 1999. Both political and intellectual elites, often sharing a solid, communist-style education, have made sure to instruct born-again Muslims about the pillars of the Albanian ‘tradition’, whereas the AMC has collaborated to safeguard the contours of an official Islam in line with state political vision. The AMC’s political interpretations have accordingly been continuously fine-tuned in response to structural and ideological shifts within the religious field, which has become increasingly rational and hierarchical but also more heavily controlled by the central state.

Yet, the state-framed religious field, with its own institutional restrictions and ideological directives, cannot fully explain why post-communist Muslims have consistently resorted to the Albanian-specific traditional templates, even in the context of the state’s laissez-faire approach towards the revival of Islam during the initial period of transition. Neither does it explain why alternative movements, which do not have the same incentives to abide by state rules, have resorted to similarly idiomatic forms in order to articulate their claims within the broad framework of the democratic rules of the game. Our analysis showed that, in line with the ideological explanations, it is the AMC leadership’s learning experiences, as well as a pool of useful arguments from the past, which have facilitated their articulation of convincing pro-democratic interpretations even in the context of various institutional incentives and ideological offers. The deprivation of most essential religious rights under the communist regime was a crucially formative experience, which informed the post-communist search of faith within the parameters of democratic rules and human rights. The existence of a useful pool of arguments inherited from the past, or so-called traditional Albanian values, has moreover provided the state establishment, the Sunni hierarchy, autonomous groups, and lay Muslims with a common, ‘Albanian-specific’ template that facilitated the consensual reclaiming of Islam in a local, pro-democratic, and pro-European way.

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute

References

Akiner, S. (2003) ‘The Politicisation of Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia’, Religion State and Society, 31, 2.
AMC (1993) Statuti i Komunitetit Mysliman Shqiptar, available at: http://licodu.cois.it/?p=220, accessed 15 December 2013.
AMC (2005) Statuti i Komunitetit Mysliman Shqiptar, available at: http://licodu.cois.it/?p=226, accessed 15 December 2013.
AMC (2012) Kryetari, available at: http://www.kmsh.al/al/?page_id=17, accessed 10 December 2012.
Schwedler, J. (2011) ‘Can Islamists Become Moderates? Rethinking the Inclusion-moderation Hypothesis’, *World Politics*, 63, 2.

Sinani, B. (2010) ‘Have Turks Replaced Arabs in Albania?’, *E-Zani i Nalte*, 23 September, available at: [http://e-zani.blogspot.it/2010/09/kane-zevendesuar-turqit-arabet-ne.html](http://e-zani.blogspot.it/2010/09/kane-zevendesuar-turqit-arabet-ne.html), accessed 15 November 2015.

Stan, L. & Turcescu, L. (2011) *Church, State and Democracy in Expanding Europe* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Sulstarova, E. (2006) *Arratisje nga Lindja: Orientalizmi Shqiptar nga Naimi te Kadareja* (Tirana, Botimet Dudaj).

Sytari, M. (2011) *Faik Hoxha. Para Pasqyres Se Nje Jete* (Shkup, Logos).

Tezcur, G. M. (2010) ‘The Moderation Theory Revisited: The Case of Islamic Political Actors’, *Party Politics*, 16, 1.

Topi, B. (2010) Speech held at the Conference, *The Contribution of Religious Harmony in Processes of Integration*, Tirana, 2 April.

Trix, F. (1995) ‘The Resurfacing of Islam in Albania’, *East European Quarterly*, 28, 4.

Vickers, M. & Pettifer, J. (2000) *Albania from Anarchy to a Balkan Identity* (2nd edn) (London, Hurst).

Wickham, C. R. (2004) ‘The Path to Moderation: Strategy and Learning in the Formation of Egypt’s Wasat Party’, *Comparative Politics*, 36, 2.

Young, A. (1999) ‘Religion and Society in Present Day Albania’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 14, 1.