# State atheism and the persecution of the clergy in Albania during the communist dictatorship

 **By Pjerin Mirdita**

Albania, the small country west of the Balkan Peninsula, experienced one of the cruelest dictatorships of the communist camp. The Communist Movement, which began to spread to Eastern Europe in the early decades of the 20th century, intensified during the Second World War in the name of the fight against Nazi fascism, was installed in power according to the model and instructions of the Slavocommunist leadership. Sadly, it also involved our country.

The Albanian communists were in close cooperation with the Yugoslavs, thanks both to their geographical proximity and to the instructions of the Comintern. With their coming to power in November 1944, difficult days were on the horizon for the Albanian people. Under the guise of war victors and liberators, the communists installed a dictatorial regime that lasted until 1991, when the first pluralist elections were held. For almost half a century, Albania became the most isolated country on the planet. Albanians found it difficult to imagine that there was a world beyond their state borders. Measures against anything that was non-communist were severe. Inspired by ideological hatred, at the forefront of their plans to exterminate “opponents” the communists held that of exterminating religious beliefs and clergy as their representatives: For underlying its doctrine and activity faith has permanent peace, social and national cohesion. Apart from the historical authority given by tradition, religion strongly influenced society through its institutional organization (schools, associations, charities, written culture, etc.). The clergy in Albania accompanied the believer from birth to death, not limited to the spiritual aspect of caring. Many of the central figures of patriotic culture and movements belonged to the clergy, which caused an inferiority complex in the communist leadership. Communism in Albania had no tradition at all. The communist element of the 1930s was negligible and the cause was seen in the absence of a working class in the country. Yet only the clergy, more clearly the Catholic one, had warned of a national tragedy if the communists came to power.

Communism at the core of its doctrine and activity has the ceaseless revolution and class struggle. For the communist theory there was no place for faith in God, because atheism was at the center of it. This doctrine had declared religion as an instrument in the hands of the ruling class to crush the proletariat. For the communists, the clergy stood at the forefront of the reaction, trying at all costs to hinder the development of the socialist revolution, until the overthrow of the "popular power".

The implementation of the devilish plan for the annihilation of religion was extended over a period of three decades of terror and persecution. The plan rested on two main pillars. The relentless crackdown on the clergy and intense anti-religious propaganda. By doing so, the dictatorship sought to disentangle God from the hearts of the people. The Marxist slogan "Religion, Opium for the People" was part of the propaganda discourse, before the state carried

out the final blow by the closure of the cult objects. But "scientific" atheism, transformed into criminal anti-clericalism, failed to change the religious beliefs of believers.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the state began to look closer on all the clerks and intellectuals practising the faith. Whoever showed it, was switched to doing hard work. This could have been the easiest punitive measure.

The waves of persecution of the clergy and the faithful can be divided into different periods. The first one started immediately after 1944 and continued wildly until the end of 1946, when the decisions of the National Liberation Council, which was not a legislative body, served as the "legal basis". The first act (November 1944) was the final ban on the publication of religious press organs, which in most cases had more cultural profiles. This act marked the aggression against a free conscience. Only a few weeks later, according to Yugoslav instructions, the war on religion escalated to a terrorist scale. Many clerics were arrested, tortured, sentenced to heavy imprisonment and executed. In the name of the Agrarian Reform, the state seized a large number of properties from the communities, while the 1946 Constitution, using the secular monarchist precedent, legally sanctioned the separation of state from religion and banned it at school. This is also the moment when the clergy gave up buildings of socio-cultural character, leaving only the cult objects in use. Thus, the clergy were deprived of the right to educate and form the new generation.

The second wave covered the period 1947-1950. At this time, senior clerical leadership was struck, which paved the way for a devilish maneuver aimed at overpowering religious structures. The third wave continued after 1951. The state tried to subjugate the clergy by bringing it under its influence, but it faced resistance from many Catholic clerics who refused to sign the Statute of the Catholic Autocephalous Church. Although not high in numbers, the persecution was equally vicious, leading to the firing of some clerics. The fourth and final wave is the one that began in 1967, the year when Albania proudly proclaimed itself "the world's first atheist state".

The most common allegations used against the clergy were:

*Betrayal and cooperation with the occupier.*

*Creation and participation in anti-revolutionary organizations (gangs) aimed at overthrowing the government by force.*

*Agent activity in the service of the Vatican and imperialist powers. Agitation and propaganda.*

*Unlawful exercise of religious rites (after 1967).*

The fight against religion did not spare cultural heritage, even though the law for its protection existed. Along with the persecution of the clergy, a devastating tide also struck at cult objects and the material basis of religious denominations. Almost everything was flattened out and the few surviving cult objects were appropriated by the state for use on the basis of state interest. The clergy were also excluded from the pantheon of our national culture. Their contribution to many areas of knowledge was immediately deleted. The most striking figure was undoubtedly Father Gjergj Fishta, who would be regarded as "a rabid fanatic, an idealist of everything patriarchal, partisan of the modernization and romanization of Albanian culture, anthem of primitivism and the fierce enemy of any progress". The sacred books were replaced by Acts of the dictator, religious symbols by party symbols. The new religion was "Marxism - Leninism", the new believer was the soulless atheist, the "New Man" - the most precious work of the Party, while the oath to God was converted into the solemn oath "For the Ideal of the Party".

The Constitution of 1976, in Articles 37 and 55, prohibited the practice of religion and the establishment of religious organizations. Until the 1990s, no religious rites were celebrated. Until one day, as "light beyond darkness", the practice of religion appeared publicly in November 1990.

**1944-1949, the years of great terror against the Catholic clergy.**

The first cleric to be sentenced to death after the communists seized power was Don Lazer Shantoja. He was arrested in the Sheldia Mountains in the early days of December 1944. He was executed in Tirana on March 5, 1945 at the age of 53. A few months later, on February 4, 1945, Don Ndre Zadeja was arrested. He was executed by aring squad on March 25, 1945.

Monsignor Gasper Thaçi and Monsignor Vincenc Prennushi were called by Enver Hoxha, who proposed secession from the Vatican, which meant the church's submission to the state. But the response of the two top prelates was blunt and negative, as it violated the universality of the Albanian Catholic Church and the relationship of separation between religion and politics. Soon in July 1945 Father Anton Harapi was arrested. He was executed on February 20, 1946. On July 18, 1946 Don Alfons Tracki, who was accused of being a "war criminal", was shot dead. In November 1946 the German priest Don Josef Marxen was shot. On May 19, 1947 Bishop Vincenc Prennushi was arrested. He was accused of being "linked to war criminals and the Italian Christian Democratic Party". He was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment and died ill from tortures at the Durres prison in March 1949. On July 31, 1948, in the Koplik City Investigator, Don Pjeter Cuni and Don Aleksander Sirdani were tortured and drowned in a sewage well. This was the first cycle of punishments and executions that the Catholic clergy experienced in Albania in the early years of the communist regime.

**Sophisticated scenarios against the Muslim Community and the intrigues against the Bektashi clergy.**

Since the early days of the establishment of the communist power, political pressure on the Muslim community increased significantly. The communists demanded that senior clergy leaders be replaced with trusted elements who came from their ranks. The movement aimed at clearing the leadership structures of the Community from unwanted clergy and activists. It was a violent intervention by the communist state in organizing the life of the Community. Thus began a harsh "exposing" propaganda through the press, radio, forms of education, cinema, theater, and entertainment. All this encountered resistance from the Community and the believers. On September 11, 1946 Hafiz Musa Derguti was arrested and charged as "linked to the Postriba Movement", which was one of the first revolts against the communist regime. In 1947, Hafiz Ali Kraja, a Hoxha and theologian of the Muslim faith, was arrested and sentenced to death. By decision no. 213 of June 8, 1947, he was sentenced to life in prison and sentenced to 25 years in prison. Notable, too, was the intervention by the communist government against the Bektashi Community to bring it under control. Consequently, two antagonistic currents were created in this community, the climax of which culminated on the night of March 18, 1947, with a triple murder within the premises of the Bektashi headquarter. According to the official version of the time, "patriotic and progressive clerics", at the same time prominent political-military figures of the regime, Baba Faja Martaneshi, and Baba Fejzo Dervishi, were "killed by the humiliating, treacherous and reactionary hand" of the chief, Abaz Halim Dedei, who then killed himself. After the 1990s, many researchers have come up with facts that speak of a clear criminal scenario by the communist regime.

**The persecution against the Orthodox Church and its clergy.**

Along with the agrarian and educational reform, the communist regime also struck down those orthodox clerics who were considered problematic or incompatible with it. The crackdown focused not only on the ranks of the high hierarchy but also on the ranks of those lower clerics who had come out against the new system. The preparations for the crackdown on Orthodox clerics, designated as anti-communists, began as early as the second half of 1945. Irene Banushi was the first of the senior clerics to be struck. The reasons for Irene's arrest were not immediately understood, and it appears that he himself was not very clear. He was arrested on October 28, 1946. In 1949 he was released from prison but rearrested in 1952 because of his opposition to the high KOASH hierarchy course and the religious policies pursued by the communist regime. The target of the communists was also Christopher Kisi, who headed the Orthodox Church from 1936 to 1944. The press and propaganda of the time launched an attack on the archbishop. It all was started on April 7, 1946, by the Hosteni magazine. Two articles of this date, which had not been selected at random, were full of satire and derision against Kisi during the war. More specifically, it mentioned a panegyric that the archbishop had written about Mussolini and a decoration he had received from the fascist authorities. All of that was not true. This was only the beginning of the persecution against the Orthodox clergy. Over the years, the Orthodox Church has also faced domestic political problems. The peak was reached in 1967 when churches and monasteries were destroyed and religious activity was finally banned.

**The trial against the “Albanian Union” organization, a fictional trial.**

Immediately after the first shock wave, persecution against the Catholic clergy escalated rapidly. The center of this persecution continued to be the city of Shkodra. Through its activity, the Catholic clergy in this city carried great weight. The communists targeted two of the most prominent orders of the Albanian Catholic Church, the Jesuit and Franciscan orders. So soon mass punishments would begin. On December 27, 1945 the organization "Albanian Union" was unveiled by the Shkodra Internal Branch operatives. The organization was led by seminarian Mark Çuni, who was studying at the Jesuit Papal Seminary and had formed this organization without the permission and knowledge of his superiors. It was considered to be enough to close the cycle of arrests with 39 people, all accused of being the organizers and activists of the organization. Father Giovanni Fausti and Father Daniel Dajani were charged as leaders of the "Albanian Union". They were arrested on December 31, 1945. Immediately after them, a few days later, in January 1946, Father Gjon Shllaku of the Franciscan order was arrested. The court imposed the death sentence on Father Giovanni Fausti, Father Daniel Dajani and Father Gjon Shllaku. Three other people were shot with them: Mark Çuni, Qerim Sadiku and Gjelosh Lulashi. The court also sentenced 7 people to life imprisonment, 6 people to 30 years in prison and 16 people from 2 years to 20 years of imprisonment.

**Old people, new people. Closure of cultural and educational institutions.**

The activity of religious communities extended beyond services for believers, covering many different areas, especially those of education, culture and charity. Thus, the process of confiscation was also directed at their movable and immovable property, because in their educational institutions they prepared generations with a different background from the establishment of communist schools, and therefore appeared as potential opponents of the communist regime. With the coming of the communists in power, after the organization of mounted trials against the clergy in Shkodra and Tirana, it was decided to close all school institutions of all kinds. The decision to dissolve all various organizations and societies was also taken. Decision no. 14, dated March 6, 1946 of the Council of Ministers called the activity of the Catholic clergy "anti-national" and "aiding the intervention and spread of fascism in Albania". Even madrasas or cultural institutions run by the Muslim community had the same fate. They were sealed off and seized by the communist state in 1947. Eventually all the movable and immovable property of the religious communities was seized. Schools, seminars, assemblies, institutions were closed, library funds were also burned, and all seminaries or cultural organizations were distributed. Only churches and mosques were allowed to be used even though they passed as state property.

**Weapons in the Franciscans’ Church, a dark communist scenario.**

November 1946 marks another major step in striking the Catholic clergy. In the city of Shkodra, at night between 16 and 17, State Security officers planned to bring weapons, ammunition and documents to the Franciscan Monastery and St Francis Church, which would be discovered a few hours later in the morning by the same persons. By means of this scenario they sought to defame the clergy in the eyes of the people. They also accused them of collaborating with the occupiers to the detriment of Albania, or of participating in armed movements that took place recently against the communists. After that Monsignor Frano Gjini, Monsignor Nikollë Deda, Father Çiprijan Nika, Father Mati Prennushi were arrested and sentenced to death. Dozens of other clerics were also sentenced to many years in prison. Those sentenced to death were executed on March 11, 1948, behind the wall of the Rrmaji cemetery, at 5:00 a.m. Four months later, another wave of arrests broke out in Shkodra. This time it was special, because all those who had organized the scenario ended up under indictment. Thus, on July 28, 1948, Pjerin Kçira, Gjovalin Mazreku, Lin Çollaku, Zef Bardhoku and Nush Simoni were arrested. In the courtroom, Pjerin Kçira, perhaps moved by his conscience, refuted the accusation against the panel, reminding them that they could not do it, as they had done with the Franciscans themselves a few months ago. So all the people of Shkodra learned what was the truth. The trial was immediately suspended and Pjerin Kçira was shot dead a few days later.

**New church statute, a binding agreement.**

While the 1949 decree obliged religious communities to draft their new statutes and regulations, the Catholic Church set up a special commission to draft this statute. In the Archdiocese of Shkodra, in February 1950, Bishop Bernardin Shllaku convened the General Assembly of the Clergy, in order to present to it a general report of the commission as well as a first draft of the statute, which was drafted in full accordance with provisions of the Canonical Code and Christian doctrine. The draft was rejected by the communist government because it was said to be in violation of the Law on Religious Communities. It was rejected because Chapters III and IV regulated matters of administrative dependence of the Catholic Church directly from the Pope, which contradicted the above law. Following the failure of the first negotiations between the State and the Church, in 1951 the Political Bureau removed Tuk Jakova, who represented the government, and appointed Mehmet Shehu. He invited the only living bishop he had left, Bishop Bernard Shllaku, and through death threats forced him to have a deal. On May 30, 1951 57 priests of the 185 that had been there in 1945 convened in Shkodra. After much debate, the statute was adopted, but not with the agreement and signature of all. Thus, prosecution of opponents of the Statute were to begin soon. Don Dedë Malaj and Father Konrad Gjolaj were arrested as part of a group that had committed "treason to the homeland" and "agitation and propaganda". Don Dedë Malaj was shot dead in May 1959, while Father Konrad Gjolaj was sentenced to 25 years in prison. Another trial that has long remained in the memory of the citizens of Shkodra is the one against Don Ejëll Kovaçi. In the courtroom held in the “Republika” cinema, his sister unmasked Hilmi Seiti, the head of the Interior Ministry Branch, who tortured her brother to sign the indictment. Don Ejëll Kovaçi was shot in 1958.

**The collapse and destruction of the "stones of faith".**

In its beginnings, the communist dictatorship, although seizing many movable and immovable properties of religious communities, left some of its cult objects in use to perform all religious services. Until 1967, many churches, mosques, and masjids continued to function regularly even though dictatorial pressure was high and the fear of their being frequented by the population was high. The "programmatic" speech given by Enver Hoxha on February 6, 1967 "Further revolutionizing the party and power" set in motion "broad popular measures, pupils, workers and cooperatives" to finalize the fight against the clergy with the action of closure and destruction of cult objects. On February 15 wall-posters began to be placed on the doors of religious institutions. On February 27, a secret order bearing Enver Hoxha's signature gave impetus to the mass destruction of cult objects. The first object that was destroyed was the Monastery of St. Vlash in Durres. Many mosques, masjids and churches throughout Albania began to be destroyed. Many other objects turned into stables, youth clubs, military bases, storehouses or warehouses. According to the information report "On the First Results of the Fight Against Religion and Some Measures for its Further Development", dated August 30, 1967, a total of 2169 shrines were destroyed in Albania, of which 740 were mosques, 609 Orthodox churches, 158 Catholic churches and 530 masjids. Their property was taken over together with the religious institutions. By decree of the Presidium of the People's Assembly no. 4263 of 1967 the immovable property of religious communities was either transferred to state ownership or handed over to cooperatives. The churches, mosques, masjids, etc., which were in the cities passed to the executive committees, and those in the villages passed to the agricultural cooperatives. The balance of the accounts and current accounts of all religious institutions by the end of March of that year was 19,593,070 ALL. All these data were presented as a success achieved by the communist state in a very short time.

**The year 1967, the dream of a final cleansing.**

Decree no. 4337, dated November 13, 1967 repealed all previous laws and decrees on religious communities and their statutes. This decision would normally run counter to any rights enshrined in the International Conventions, but it did not matter to the Communist Party, on the contrary, it was only the beginning of a new wave of persecution against the clerics still alive. In 1966, Haji Hafiz Sabri Koçi and Haji Faik Hoxha, two senior clerics of the Muslim faith, were arrested. And also among the first trials against the clergy during that period was that of April 1968. At the Stigmatine Sisters Church, converted into a courtroom, Don Zef Bici and Don Mark Dushi were charged and sentenced to death, while Don Frano Illia, Father Gega Luma, Don Mark Hasi, Alfons Radovani and Kole Marlacaj were sentenced to prison. In the same courtroom and in the same year Father Zef Plumi and Don Nikollë Mazreku were sentenced to prison. One of the saddest stories of the early 1970s was that of Don Shtjefën Kurti. After serving 17 years in prison and released in 1963, he was arrested again in June 1970. He was accused of "agitating and propaganda for undermining and weakening popular power." So he was sentenced to death and executed in October 1971. But the truth of his sentence was that he had baptized a newborn baby and his father had given the baby a Catholic name. The last cleric sentenced to death during the communist dictatorship was Don Mikel Beltoja. He was arrested in 1973 and shot dead almost a year later, in February 1974. Convictions continued with Monsignor Ernest Çoba, who was the last bishop of the Catholic Church. He was arrested in 1977 on charges of "treason against the homeland and agitation and propaganda against popular power". He was sentenced to 25 years in prison and died mysteriously at the prison hospital in January 1980.

**The Atheist Museum, an example of communist regime utopia.**

On July 10, 1968, an atheistic exhibition entitled "On the Reactionary Role of Religion" was inaugurated in Shkodra, which remained open for 5 years. It was also conceived as a traveling exhibition in villages, highlands and industrial areas. On the eve of the opening of the VII Congress of Women to be held in Shkodra (in the cathedral building converted into a Palace of Sports) on June 9, 1973, the exhibition was transformed into an "Atheist Museum" with anti-religious propaganda. The communist government boasted of this Museum because it was the only one of its kind in the World. At the entrance to the museum was Marx's quote: "Religion is opium for the people." The exhibition space was divided into two floors and treated different themes. Two exhibition pavilions were located on the first floor, dealing with "the tradition of the Albanian people in the fight against religion and clergy" and "the 1967 popular revolutionary movement against religion and its material base". On the second floor were three other exhibition pavilions, dealing with the "anti-science and reactionary character of religious ideology", "religion as a political tool of the ruling and conquering classes" and "the failure of the counter-revolutionary activity of the clergy after the invasion”. In the stands of each pavilion were exposed various documents, pictures, materials intended to highlight the hostile and reactionary role of the clergy, especially the Catholic one, as a servant of the Vatican and imperialism. This museum also had a moving exhibition consisting of 23 stands, which were exhibited in different areas not only of Shkodra but of Albania, too.

Visitors to this museum were school students, working class members, members of other Communist parties visiting Albania, as well as foreign tourists. The Atheist Museum remained open until December 13, 1990. The building where this museum was located was attacked and attempted to be demolished on the same day as the attempt to overthrow Enver Hoxha's bust occurred in Shkodra.

**November 1990, religion raging in people's hearts.**

1990 was the year of great change not only in Eastern Europe, but also for Albania. Thus, on November 4, 1990, a Catholic priest who had been released from prison in April 1989, summoned by a resident of the neighborhood near the Catholic cemetery of Rrmaji, wanted to celebrate with only a few attendants, a Eucharistic celebration, which would only last a few minutes. It was all made up for the time being and there was normally no organization, because the people present at the cemetery were there to commemorate their loved ones. Thus, the priest, Don Simon Jubani, the clergyman who had suffered communist prisons for more than 25 years, declared November 11 as the day when the first mass would be celebrated after 1967. The young people of Shkodra and not only them took care of their organization and well-being. The event took on extraordinary proportions. All the people of Shkodra, without any religious difference, contributed financially to the restoration work that was carried out within the week. So on November 11, over fifty thousand people, from the city and villages, at 11:00 am, headed to the Catholic cemetery, where the first mass was celebrated after 23 years. A few days later, the same event continued at the Lead Mosque, where the first celebration of the Muslim rite was held. On November 16th all the citizens of Shkodra, regardless of religion, came together once again, giving a strong blow to the communist dictatorship. Hafiz Sabri Koçi, a Muslim cleric who had suffered communist prisons for two decades, was the one who led the celebration. In March 1991, at the Cathedral of Shkodra, the first mass was celebrated after the facility had been converted into a sports palace. Citizens likewise headed to all those buildings that had escaped the devastating tide, restoring them once again to their former identity.

**Final conclusions**

The Albanian people never severed their spiritual connection with religion. Although the communist dictatorship temporarily won the battle with it, it could never win the war. In fact that war was lost, because religion cannot perish, just as a believing and freedom-loving people cannot perish. Many believers practiced religious rites in secret. Religious holidays were celebrated in close family settings. In the holy places the pilgrimage was performed at night. In spite of the danger, there were not few believers who preserved religious relics and literature. Resistance also appeared in the case of baby names of religious significance, although the country's civil registries had instructions to prevent this occurrence. No dictatorship or political power can rest on God and this is an absolute law. God himself protects religion. It is the duty of all Albanian society to remember, honor and appreciate the contribution of religious personalities and believers who dedicated their energies and lives to believing in God, aspiring for a democratic and European Albania, for which they were unjustly punished by the cruel hand of communist dictatorship.

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