

Albania tastes freedom

NEW YORK — My phone rang in the middle of a busy Manhattan afternoon and from very far away a deep, accented voice that resonated with emotion said, "Hello, Mr. Eric ... we are almost free. We are almost free!"

A year ago, no one in Albania would have been allowed — or have dared — to call abroad. But now, as Europe's last Stalinist regime struggles to cling to power, Albania's 3.3 million restive people may soon break the chains of the tyranny that has brought them 47 years of terror, suffering and poverty.

Later, in a New York City hotel, I stood among more than 500 Albanians as they chanted "Democracy, democracy." Solid men in plain clothing, with deeply lined faces and thick, callused hands. Mountaineers exiled from their Balkan home to the rotting urban jungle of New York City. Tough, pistol-packing highlanders from a bygone age, ready to give their lives to defend a guest or to riddle a foe with gunfire.

I had come to meet with the two leaders of Albania's new opposition, the Democratic Party, whose formation was recently allowed by the reformist regime of Communist party boss Ramiz Alia. Breaking with party hard-liners who sought to sustain the Stalinist policies of late dictator Enver Hoxha, Alia is trying to at least create the semblance of democracy in Albania and allow its long-suffering people to blow off steam through elections.

The communists are going to have a fight on their hands. The opposition is headed by two remarkable young men. Dr. Sali Berisha, who radiates political charisma and inner power, and Dr. Gramoz Pashko.

With his splendid aquiline nose, shock of black hair, and a face that seems chiseled out of Balkan granite, Berisha looks much like Albania's great medieval hero, Skenderbeg. By sharp contrast, the bespectacled Pashko, a brilliant economist, appears quiet, reserved and a man of deep thought. The charismatic Berisha and scholarly Pashko make a superb political partnership.

Both told me of their struggle to fight an election with both hands tied behind their backs. Their

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party has no money, no printing equipment, no fax machines, no access to the state-run media. The Democrats are amateurs who must campaign against the powerful, ubiquitous Communist party apparatus that is implanted in every factory, apartment block and school in Albania.

Most Albanians are sick to death of the poverty and jail-house atmosphere created by communist rule. Conditions today are even worse than when I was the first western journalist to enter Albania 12 years ago. The country is seething with rebellion, as riots over the past year and the flight of more than 15,000 Albanians to Greece and Italy have shown.

But Albanians must still live with everyday fear. The Communist party is threatening that voting cards will be checked for fingerprints. Those who vote against the party will lose their jobs, pensions, food rations. The same fate will befall parents, children and other relatives.

Behind these threats stands Albania's notorious secret police, the Sigurimi, with its army of informers. Did the opposition leaders feel personal fear, I asked them?

Berisha replied with a shrug, "We expect arrest at any moment."

But Albania's regime, in desperate need of western aid, may have to rein in its secret police and army. Washington and Tirana have just restored diplomatic relations after 52 years. Albania seems to have freed most — but not all — political prisoners. Party hard-liners, led by Hoxha's widow, Nexhmie, have been sidelined for now. However, there is still talk of a military coup by Stalinist officers and secret police.

At the same time, everyone in Albania is looking anxiously at neighboring Yugoslavia, which is poised on the brink of civil war. Events in Yugoslavia may be used by the Tirana regime as an excuse to delay or overturn election results.

All Albanians are deeply anguished by the oppression of the two million ethnic Albanians in the rebellious Yugoslav province of Kosova. Backing the Kosovars will, Pashko promised, be a priority if his party wins the election. Something, sadly, that few Albanians believe will be allowed to happen — and least not soon.

As I was leaving, I talked with a man I knew who told me his brother, who was thrown into prison by the communists at the age of 12, had just been released after 40 years behind bars. Albania, in spite of recent reforms, still remains a giant prison colony. Time now for Canada, which has diplomatic relations with Tirana, to demand that the Alia regime allow truly free elections.

This means Canadian poll-watchers and the assurance that if the secret police move against the democracy movement, all western aid and relations with Albania will be cut. Ottawa should stand ready to help a reborn, democratic Albania grow strong and free.