

## Agrarian Reform of the Monarchist Period in Albania

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### Abstract

*In the early twentieth century, Albania represented an underdeveloped agrarian country in terms of economic development, with significant residues of feudal relations in production, where the main role was played by agriculture and when the rural population constituted 90% of the country's population. There was a great fragmentation of agricultural land ownership, which did not appear unique for the whole country, as well as an extreme polarization of property that had raised the need for an agrarian reform, which could contribute to create a fair adjustment of ownership ratio at a national level. In relation to this issue, after the First World War and especially during the years 1921-1924, in Parliament and outside it, in the unofficial and official press, were held many severe debates and discussions between progressive and democratic forces on the one hand, who supported the resolution of the issue in favor of the peasant farmers in Albania, and the conservatives on the other hand, who were to maintain the current situation on land ownership or a reform that would not undermine their plans and interests. The first attempts for the concrete realization of an agrarian reform in Albania were made after 1928 by the monarchical system government. The implementation of an agrarian reform and the right solution given to the peasantry's demands for land, constituted one of the most fundamental issues in the development and progress of Albania at that time. The article aims to present the reasons for undertaking such a reform, the progress of its implementation and its consequences in Albania.*

### 1. Introduction

The agrarian issue includes in its entirety the agricultural land problem, one of the major sources of human life, the technique and method of operating the land, the relationship between people and the land and important tools used in agriculture, the social problems of the relationship between people and social groups, the relationship and problems between the agricultural and industrial producers, between urban and rural zone, that are derived and determined from the mode of production, the forms of ownership of the land and tools of production, and the character of commanding and possessing it. Throughout almost the twentieth century, the agrarian issue has had a major influence on the development of our national life events. It has provoked severe clashes of interest, which have resulted in significant political consequences and can say without exaggerating that the issue of agrarian reform, apparently and in fact, has been one of the main factors of national mischievousness.

In Albania, considering the conditions of its development, the agrarian issue will come out relatively late, only after the declaration of Independence (1912), when as a result of the increasingly impact of market economy and rapport of monetary economy in the countryside, as well as the intensified operations regarding the right of inheritance, the great manorial property was being disorganized, fragmented and reduced. However, the great manorial property and especially, the feudal and semi-feudal rapport in production didn't experience any substantial change. Regarding the agrarian issue, after the First World War and especially during 1921-1924, in the Parliament and outside of it, in the official and unofficial press, discussions and multiple and severe debates were made between the progressive and democratic forces on one side and conservatives on the other. In fact, nationwide, Noli's government of the 1924 proposed a solution to resolve the agrarian issue, but its promise remained as a project on a paper, without the opportunity, tools and time to be recoverable.

In the early period of Zog, manorial properties continued to have a wide-ranging and occupied the leading place in land ownership. This property outspread in almost all the regions of the country, but was mainly concentrated in the coastal lowland area from Shkodra to Vloa and Saranda, and as well in areas with inlying lowlands, in Elbasan, Korca,

etc..

In the early 1929, the whole country had 22.457,6 ha of land manorial property (approximately 56.9% of the land property) of which 15.458,9 ha was private property, 5.628,7 ha state property and 1.370,0-ha wakfs property. ( land of religious institutions)

According to the Land Law of 1856, of the Ottoman Empire, which remained in vigor even after the declaration of independence of Albania, even up to 1925, ownership of the land across the country was divided into five categories: *lands of simple ownership*, or 'mylqe', *the state's public land* or 'mirie', *lands of religious institutions*, or " wakfs land" , *lands left to collective usage and abandoned or deserted lands*.

The fundamental statute of the Albanian Republic and after, that of the Kingdom of 1928, ended the division of the land as stated in the law of 1856. According to the new law, all the lands within the Albanian state were declared simple property owned by the state, by legal and physical persons. However, the new laws left gaps for land manipulations and occupation from powerful and specific individuals. This unification simplified legal regime of land, but on the other hand facilitated even more the landowners attempts to rob and especially state forests. Thus is explained the historical fact of the incessant reduction of manors and state forests and the continuous increase of manorial properties of the landowners and conversion of state's forests into private ones. This robbery was favored by the lack of a real cadaster, as the one that existed till 1929 was only formal. The establishment of cadastral offices, in 1929, led to the creation of mortgage offices, which did not deal at all with the registration of land ownership, since to create a complete record of land area, this had to be a general, obligatory registration with evident facts. Consequently, many plots were not listed in the mortgage records.

The manors were large agricultural properties, comprising a one or more villages in which work necessarily feofees. The manors were divided into two categories: state manors and those of private ownership. There are no accurate records regarding the surface of each of the categories.

The implementation of agrarian reform and the correct resolving of peasants' demand for land, constituted one of the most fundamental issues for the development and progress of Albania, since the rural population accounted for 90% of the country's population. On the other hand, the bourgeois-landowning Albania of that time was an outdated agrarian country with significant waste of feudal relations in production.

A pronounced polarization of property, for the whole country, which had begun in the late nineteenth century and deepened during the 20s and 30s of the twentieth century, had raised the need of an agrarian reform, which could fulfill a better control of ownership rapport nationwide. The first attempts to concrete realization of agrarian reform in the Albanian state, were made after 1928, from the monarchical government. In December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1928, at a parliamentary meeting, Zogu declared that measures would be taken for the implementation of the Agrarian Reform. Zogu's statement for an agrarian reform would raise numerous debates, discussions and reactions in the inner public opinion. A considerable number of democratic circles in fact, didn't rely on this reform. They felt that it was simply a Zogu's demagoguery. The newspaper "Liria Kombëtare" (literally translated as "National Freedom") would write *"Is it possible for the beys and agas to give away their land to the villagers and then to give it to the government? - No! - Then the Beys' agrarian reform will be a comedy"*. So, without doubt, Beys, landowners and their ideologues were against any agrarian reform and would put pressure on the government of King Zog for the Agrarian Reform Law to remain informal and not affect their interests.

In April 1929, a committee under the chairmanship of Justice Minister Hikmet Delvina, was tasked by Zog with the preparation of a project for the implementation of the reform, whilst for the study of the conditions and possibilities of its implementation was charged the Italian professor Giovanni Lorenzoni.

Representatives of the Italian capital, as well the class of landowners in the country, tried for the agrarian reform not to affect their interests, plans and their intercessory activity in Albania. Since they couldn't stop such a reform, they tried to at least apply a partial reform in Albania. So, the Italian diplomacy and Benito Mussolini, who saw Albania as a powerful area of Italian influence, tried to persuade Zog to accept the appeal of Rome on the issue of agrarian reform.

The Italian expert of agricultural issues, Professor Giovanni Lorenzoni, who directed the operations for the composition of agrarian reform bill. In this study, which relied on direct observations conducted in 30 private property or estates, as well as 30 state properties, for the first time was provided a summary of the state of agriculture in Albania, the inhibitory factors and ways of overcoming this blizzard. From this study of the agricultural situation in Albania, he derived a significant amount of shortcomings and deficiencies, which would influence in the delay of law implementation, and agrarian reform in the country as well, in rapport to the Zog's government's hurry for its implementation. Thus, the certification of real estate property, encountered difficulties caused by the messy situation inherited from the Ottoman Empire. *"Cadastral tools that are now being implemented in all civilized countries constitute, especially for Albania, the most essential and significant ground for agricultural development and regulation of state revenues. Unless the Albanian*

cadaster is not started, it'd be absurd to talk about reforms aiming the modernization and the rational improvement of agriculture" –would Professor Lorenzoni argue.

On May 3<sup>rd</sup>1930, after numerous debates and long discussions, the Agrarian Reform Law was enacted by Zog. Along with this law was enacted even a contract tip, which would regulate the rapports between farmers, so they could benefit some land from the reform. Likewise, another law was enacted creating thus the National Agricultural Bank, which would help farmers with loans.

The ultimate goal of Agrarian Reform had two main aims: First, in Economics, it would provide a general increase in agricultural production, which would guarantee the economic progress and would raise the level of welfare of the people and secondly, in the social field, it would resolve the land ownership problems by taking a part of the land from the owners and handing it to the peasants with little or without land.

Under the Agrarian Reform Law, to the big landowners, from the total amount of their land, were left to use up to 40 hectares of land (for each family). They were also left with up to 10 ha of forest and 10 ha of pastures, without expropriating, if these were located within the manor. If forests and pastures with the vineyards, olive groves, orchards and gardens were located outside the manor, they wouldn't be affected at all.

Expropriated lands were distributed to farmers and peasants by paying 20 gold francs per hectare. Each family would benefit 0.5 hectares per capita. The price in money for the taken land (no more than 5 ha of land) had to be shed all at once. This provision made the law practically inapplicable, since most of the villagers had no opportunity to buy the land with cash.

Mehdi Frashëri, Minister of National Economy, would comment regarding the Agrarian Reform:

This reform pointed out three problems:

1. to give land to 7000 families of landless farmers in Albania,
2. to necessarily cultivate those lands, whose owners until yesterday hadn't had them cultivated
3. to increase agricultural production.

The agrarian reform was conceived in such a way as to force all categories of land owners, to have it cultivated, to improve it and increase production, giving the opportunity to hand it to the one which would accomplish the duties, to the fittest, to the bravest. This way of conceiving of the Agrarian Reform, which encouraged competition, the ambition to achieve the goals and tasks taken over, replaced the inherited outdated system with a newly incentive and progressive one. In this way, it dismissed on the both sides: from the right and from the left, but of course, there's no way to have reform to simultaneously satisfy the interests of all parties. By putting a balance between the forms of agricultural economies (according its size, large, medium and small), evaluating the importance of the relatively large or medium agricultural farm and the expansion of small economies as very useful and vital in the country's conditions, the main problem was in finding a way to make the agrarian reform satisfy its best the overall interests and to ensure the progress of agriculture and the increase of production in the actual conditions of the country.

The agrarian reform outlasted for over 10 years. Meanwhile, the indicators of the implementation of agrarian reform throughout Albania were: from 9.6794 ha, which was the overall area of private estates in Albania, the expropriated area from the reform counted to 2.992,2 ha. Whilst for the state estates countrywide we have these indicators: from a total of 3.383,5 hectares, all underwent expropriation. So the expropriated estimated total area counted up to 6.375,7 hectares, from a total 13.062,9 ha that made up the total surface of state and private estates in Albania. From this reform benefited 1905 families of farmers with approximately 8763 people.

The manorial class, one of the ruling classes, taking advantage of the prolonged composition for the agrarian reform bill, tried by all means and ways to apply a partial reform, which essentially would preserve the land manorial property. Shefqet Vërlaci, Vrions and other landowners exerted strong pressure on the government of King Zog, so the Agrarian Reform Law would not affect their interests. The class of the great bourgeois associated with multiple connections with the manorial class, which assisted in the country's administration, also were significantly leading landowners, so they were against the implementation of the Agrarian Reform Law. Despite the strong insistence of Zog, in the early phase of the implementation of this reform, he did not find his parliament as willing as he would like and which in fact, it had to be. There's how Zog would comment for the "Dielli" ("Sun") newspaper: *"The people who work the land, should be the owner of it and only in this way we will increase the productivity of the country and the general welfare. Agrarian reform is for the progress and the future of the country"*.

According to the engineer Selim Zyma, who in his report that would send to DPRA, (General Directory of Agrarian Reform) would note that: *- through the implementation of such a law, there is no possibility of any manner to save the farmer from the proletariat, on the contrary, I will give rise to more suffering, as they didn't have a chance to benefit land from the agrarian reform, and are constrained thus to stand the bad behavior of the landowners*, all these, came as a

result of the incorrect ratio value assigned to expropriate fiefdoms and the way the expropriation wasn't in favor of the farmer. "As well, - would he further analyze- *the difference seen in the results of the implementation of the Agrarian Reform, in the state and private estates, is quite noticeable. In the state manors, since the land surface is completely expropriated, installation of proletarian farmers was done without any difficulty, and so, there are no farmers remaining without the piece of land given by the law. The proletarian farmers of the state estate, through the implementation of the plan of installation, are off of the old custom of proletarians and have started to work intensively, so from the application of the Agrarian Reform Law in the state estates, we can say by rights it has resulted in its best and most rational effects in every aspect*".

As for private estates, the report noted that the development of the agrarian reform law, was not based on a case study, the method of expropriation of private manors decreed by law would never guarantee the installation of proletarian farmers who work in the private manors, since the inviolable land of bread allows the owner of the manor to keep and protect the best and most valuable land, so the surface of the land that remains for expropriation available for the Agrarian Reform, is composed of land without value, and so the manor's farmers do not apply for installation and in such conditions, the implementation of agrarian reform wouldn't show any beneficial effect.

Delays in the implementation of this law were of various forms and related to a variety of causes. *Thus, delays caused by difficulties faced by any radical reform of a secular state, has infuriated the manors' owners against their feoffees, whose behaviour towards the feoffees openly shows their wish to expel them from their manors and lands, and use them as pasture* - calls another report directed to the Prime Minister by the proletarian farmers of some estates of several sub-prefectures of Delvina and Saranda regarding the difficulties experienced by the implementation of such a reform.

There were delays even regarding the law for the opening of a national agricultural bank, which, despite the establishment for the accumulation of an initial capital of 500 thousand gold francs, disregarded the possibility of collecting one million gold francs, and stopped with the procurement of one or two organizer specialists from outside.

The implementation of the law of the agrarian reform remained mostly on paper. In fact, the law, did not even effect the large manorial property or the economic power of landowners. Landowners and beys, who staunchly opposed the reform, made themselves effort to prevent and sabotage it completely; they divided their properties between other family members, relatives, and made fictitious donations and sales and complicated the current ownership situation on the land. Lack of funds, technicians and a variety of other causes left the works lingering. In June 1932, when the work on its implementation had not yet begun, Zog would declare a law supplement that actually made profound changes and further liberalize the first law. The threat to the interests of landowners was problematic and difficult, since they had the power of governing the state. Zog on the one hand wanted to put pressure on some of them through reform, while on the other he wanted to satisfy farmers' requests, in order to avoid social conflicts. Even though he was interested in strengthening the rural bourgeoisie, the capitalist private property in agriculture that would pave the way to the country's progress, the implementation of the reform showed that Zog had not been determined to make a full agrarian reform and going on to its full completion.

The report of the DPRA's director Mr. Salih Vuciterni and the organizer, Colonel Giovanni Ferrota in 1932, would highlight the difficulties associated with the implementation of such a law in Albania: *"In Albania, the rural property is generally bounded by bizarre borderlines. It looks difficult to find a manor or private property with stable borders, and because of this, the state hasn't the slightest idea of the limits of its assets. Most of the land-patents do not correspond to the original ones, which for the majority of the lands and large areas do not exist, but are found in the archives of the cadastral office in Turkey. From the unusual disorder that exists in stabilizing the real borders, strife and robbery have not yet disappeared and in such a state, the implementation of the cadaster would be impossible"*.

Implementation of the reform was gradually neglected and left in limbo until finally and officially abandoned completely. In 1937, ostensibly for lack of funds, the government abandoned the DPRA and in June 1938 the implementation of agrarian reform in the state manors was banned by law.

One of the reasons for the failure of the reform was that the Albanians, even Zog himself, being bound with the centuries-old traditions, had it difficult to easily assimilate new and foreign ideas regarding the ownership of land.

According to the scholar Bernd Fischer, agrarian reform was simultaneously, the most visionary element of its reform program, as well as it was the field in which the biggest failure was being recorded. However, just the fact that Zog had taken a step towards reform, implied that he had renounced his position as chairman of the conservative group of wealthy landowners, which he had headed until 1924.

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