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THE STANCE OF GREAT BRITAIN TOWARDS THE GOVERNMENT OF FAN NOLI

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Abstract. After the First World War the internal political scene of Albania was characterized with an instability and political struggle between parties; such situation reached its peak in June 1924 when a rebellion was followed by seizure of power by opposition. This event attracted attention of all powers, especially of Great Britain, who was concerned about her oil concessions in Albania. Therefore this work aims to elaborate the attitude of Great Britain towards to Government of Noli. At the same time this work pretends to give a reflection to international and national circumstances which lead to failure of Government Noli to be recognized internationally. A particular emphasize will be given to the influences of British consuls on High Majesty Government in relation to the issue of recognition of Noli's Government. This work was mainly based on British archival sources.
Key words: Fan Noli, H. Aires, R. Parr, Zog, Foreign Office, etc.

Introduction

The Movement of June 1924 in Albania and establishment of a government under the leadership of Fan Noli attracted the attention of international community. Not only the neighbours of Albania, but even the Great Powers like Britain, France, Italy and Russia were interested about the situation in Albania. All these states perceived the events in Albania through the angle of their political, economic and military interests.

As soon as the government was established, Noli addressed a letter to British Prime Minister, MacDonald. This letter emphasized the mandate that the High Regence of Albania gave to Noli to form a liberal government. As a primary objective of this government was formation of a new and modern administration and establishment of friendly relations with other states, particularly with its neighbours.¹²⁰

Fan Noli was hoping that his governmental programme, inspired by principles of liberal democracy, will face an understanding and support in democratic Western countries. First of all, Noli was expecting a sympathy from Great Britain due to the fact that Ramsay MacDonald was heading a left wing labour party.¹²¹

The efforts of Noli were followed by General Secretary of Albanian Foreign Office, Xhafer Vila. While explaining the plan of Noli's government to approve oil concessions for Anglo-Persian

¹²⁰ FO 371/9639 C992/28/90, A note from Albanian Government, 19 June 1924, p. 137; Zhivko Avramovski, "Qëndrimi i Anglisë ndaj qeverisë Noli në Shqipëri në vitin 1924", Gjurmime Albanologjike, Seria e Shkencave Historike, Nr. II-1972, Prishtinë, 1974, p. 163.

¹²¹ Arben Puto, Shqipëria politike, Tiranë, Toena, 2009, p. 369-370.

Company, Vila asked about the period when the Great Britain will recognize the government of Noli. The British ambassador in Albania declaring that he didn't receive any official instruction from his government, expressed his personal opinion that: "...the High Majesty Government will act in accordance to the range that this government will be accepted by people and by tendencies to provide a moderate rule".¹²²

The efforts of Vila and hopes of Noli were empty-handed. Upon receiving the letter from Noli, Howard Smith, the Chief of Central Europe Section in Foreign Office, on 18th of June made a written record expressing his doubts to review the letter or to act as it was not received at all. In his records it was written that the Foreign Office was informed about two parallel governments in Albania, one in Vlore by Fan Noli and the other one in Shkoder, so Foreign Office was not sure if Noli's government should be recognized as a real government for the entire Albania.¹²³

As a result the Foreign Office refused to review Noli's letter and before any diplomatic actions the British ambassador in Albania was asked to provide information about the authority of this government.¹²⁴

But, at this period Mr. Harry Eyres was acting as a British ambassador in Albania. As an experienced diplomat he exercised a great influence on Foreign Office, therefore his reports will play an essential role on guiding the British diplomacy toward the government of Noli. In the past Eyres established positive relations with Zogu, so he didn't pay an enthusiasm to Noli. Considering Zogu as a single competent person to govern Albania, he recommended to High Majesty Government: "...the official recognition of Noli government should be postponed until the High Majesty Government is assured that Albanian government will be turned on into a constitutional government and won't exercise any violence against political opponents, because the first act of revolutionaries was to release the person who committed an attempted murder against Zog in February 1924. The government enforced another political act. A political court was established against political opponents. This court released a death penalty to A. Zogu, Sh. Verlaci, Iliaz Vrioni, etc. Their property was seized and nationalized".¹²⁵

The reports of Eyres were confirmed by British consul in Albania, R. Parr. In a report addressed to Foreign Office, he stated: "...the new government in Albania aims to punish the main supporters of previous government by expulsion and seizure of their property. This government will not call the parliament, but intends to organize elections in the future".¹²⁶

The statements of British representatives in Albania were sufficient for Nicolson, the Head of Central European Section in FO, to decide not rushing in this issue. He declared: "...those reports shows that (1) the revolutionary government doesn't exercise its power in entire Albania, (2) there are no indications that this government will behave in a civilized manner and give off a violence. Therefore, we will wait a while before granting them a recognition".¹²⁷

Regardless this attitude, the Noli's government continued its efforts to secure a recognition from Great Britain. During a meeting between the Albanian ambassador in London and Howard Smith, Secretary of Foreign Office, held on 7 July 1924, the Albanian ambassador, Mehmet Konica, requested a recognition by Great Britain, emphasizing that such an act was already made by Italy

¹²²Zh. Avramovski, "Qëndrimi i Anglisë ndaj qeverisë Noli në Shqipëri në vitin 1924", p. 164-165.

¹²³FO 371/9639 C 9724/28/90, Fan Noli to Foreign Office, 17 June 1924, p. 112-113.

¹²⁴FO 371/9639 C 9724/28/90, Foreign Office to H. Eyres, 18 June 1924, p. 115.

¹²⁵Pranvera Dibra, *Shqipëria dhe diplomacia angleze 1919-1927*, Tiranë, Nerainda, 2005, p. 247.

¹²⁶FO 371/9639 C 9993/28/90, R. Parr to Foreign Office, Durrazzo, 23 June 1924, p. 145.

¹²⁷P. Dibra, *Shqipëria dhe diplomacia angleze 1919-1927*, p. 247.

and Greece. Smith, being aware that the note of Mussolini addressed to Noli didn't mean the recognition, replied that the High Majesty Government was observing if the Albanian government will obtain an acceptance from its citizens and will exercise its power in entire Albania, and that the High Majesty Government is waiting for reports of its representative in Albania, Mr. Parr. Konica replied that reports of Parr and Eyres should be prejudiced, because they were supporters of previous government, even inspiring them against the actual government. Smith refused to talk about the role of Eyres and promised that a decision regarding the recognition of Noli's government will be taken soon by Foreign Office.¹²⁸

As promised to Konica, the Foreign Office performed a detailed analyse regarding the developments in Albania and attitudes to be taken by the High Majesty Government regarding the recognition of Albanian government. In his report, after pointing out that Eyres had requested non-recognition of Noli government, Smith cited the statements given by Eyres: "...since 1921 all governments in Albania were established in accordance to the law. They had majority in parliament or secured sufficient votes. The government of Noli doesn't represent the majority in parliament and it doesn't intend to call the parliament. Their programme is poor, they also plan to prosecute people involved in last events. By other words, the Noli government was established by a revolutionary action and intends to rule without the parliamentary control, eliminating its opponents".¹²⁹

Furthermore, in its reports Smith paid an attention to economic interests of Britain in Albania. Foreign Office was doubtful if the recognition of this government will be followed by granting of oil concessions to Anglo-Persian Company. Also two other factors were counted: (1) memorandum of diplomatic library regarding the positions to be taken when dealing with recognition of governments deriving from revolutions and (2) the opinion of the diplomat Sir Cecil Hurst, of 19 February 1923. Both factors indicated that the practice of British government in such cases was refusal to grant a recognition to governments deriving from revolutions unless is not demonstrated that such governments are supported by their citizens.¹³⁰

As an example of this attitude was taken the case of overthrown of Portuguese Monarchy and establishment of a Republican regime in 1910. The Great Britain maintained unofficial relations with this government, like with a de facto government. The other European countries followed the British attitude against Portugal. The official recognition of Portuguese government was conditional to its approval by the parliament, derived from free and democratic elections. This condition was fulfilled in September 1911 and the Portuguese government was recognized by Great Britain and other European countries in de jure form.¹³¹

As you can see, the example of Portugal represented the necessity of legalization of government through elections, a principle to be followed by Albania as well.

The issue of recognition was processed seriously by Foreign Office, who analysed even the wording of Noli's note to Foreign Office: "...I am assigned by the Council or Regence to form a government". The Foreign Office was aware that the Council consisted of four members, three of whom left Albania because of the revolution, whereas the remaining one was also a member of the revolutionary movement.¹³²

¹²⁸FO 371/9640 C 11443/28/90, Albanian Ambassador to British Prime Minister, 8 July 1924, p. 195.

¹²⁹FO 371/9640 C 11443/28/90, Foreign Office, 21 July 1924, p. 190.

¹³⁰FO 371/9640 C 11443/28/90, Foreign Office, 21 July 1924, p. 191.

¹³¹Zh. Avramovski, "Qëndrimi i Anglisë ndaj qeverisë Noli në Shqipëri në vitin 1924", p. 168-169.

¹³²FO 371/9640 C 11443/28/90, Foreign Office, 21 July 1924, p. 191.

Therefore, the Foreign Office reached a conclusion to the lack of legal ground for the mandate by Council of Regence, since now this Council was out of function. So, based in these reports and suggestions from Eyres, Howard Smith, the First Secretary of FO, on 21 July 1924 declared: “...*Mr. Eyres has been consulted about the recognition, and he rejects the recognition...therefore, I submit my opinion to reject the recognition of Albanian government. The British consul in Albania, Mr. Parr, is instructed to maintain only limited official relations with Noli' government*”.¹³³

The decision of 21 July 1924, and the instructions given to Mr. Parr to maintain limited relations with Albanian government, marks a point when the British government gave off from recognition of Albanian government and started to calculate other options regarding Albania, such as isolation of Albania in international relations.

Anyway, it seems that oil concessions were the main reason to reject the recognition of Noli government. Eyres achieved to secure a full monopoly over the oil fields in Albania for Anglo-Persian Company. Information provided by Eyres convinced Foreign Office that the new Albanian government would not be willing to provide a similar treatment in regards to oil concessions.¹³⁴

The importance of oil sources for the stance of British government towards the government of Noli was confirmed by that age politician, Sejfi Vllamasi. In a meeting between Vllamasi and Morton Eden, a British consul and member of Intelligence Service, who provided great services for Albania during the Congress of Lushnja in 1920, the last one declared: “...*it was the oil that separated Mosul from Turkey, and it was the same oil that throw you out of power*”.¹³⁵

In fact, since the end of First World War the Great Britain showed an interest to obtain a concession for the exploration and use of the oil in Albania. Before being overturned Zog has granted to Anglo-Persian Company a potential monopoly on oil fields. The British were afraid about the fate of their concessions because Noli allowed the spread of what in London was seen as chauvinism against the foreigners. Furthermore, the British attention was focused also on the fact that Noli was keeping close connections with Albanian-American Association – VATRA, who by all means might have been obedient to defend the interests of American Standard Oil Company.

These doubts became more evident when Major Barnes, on behalf of a British company, applied for the tobacco concession through convenient conditions for Noli government, but such an application was rejected.¹³⁶

Another doubts were orientated towards the approach between Noli and Mussolini. British consul in Albania, Mr. Parr, informed Foreign Office that the ambassadors of France and Yugoslavia in Albania expressed their beliefs that Italy was standing behind Noli.¹³⁷

This report reinforced British doubts on Noli government, because the Italian influence in Albania would mark conversion of Adriatic into an Italian lake, and as a result the British road to the Mediterranean would be jeopardized in addition to a possible conflict between Yugoslavia and Italy over the Albania.

¹³³FO 371/9640 C 11443/28/90, Foreign Office, 21 July 1924, p. 191; William Bland& Ian Price, *A tangled web: A History of Anglo-American Relations with Albania (1912-1955)*, London, 1986, p. 24.

¹³⁴A. Puto, *Shqipëria politike*, p. 370.

¹³⁵Sejfi Vllamasi, *Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri (1897-1942)*, Botimet Vllamasi, Tiranë, 2012, p. 321.

¹³⁶S. Vllamasi, *Ballafaqime politike në Shqipëri (1897-1942)*,p. 381.

¹³⁷FO 371/9639 C 9890/28/90, R. Parr to Foreign Office, 20 June 1924, p. 121.

The reports of British consuls in Albania to Foreign Office during the months July-September reinforced belief in FO that non-recognition of Albanian government was a right decision. Mr. Parr was reporting about increasingly tendencies against the foreigners in Albania, particularly about the negative image of Great Britain in Albanian daily press. Great Britain was also upset about the obstruction on business activities of foreigners in Albania.¹³⁸

On the other hand, beside the negative reports of British consuls, it was the Noli government who made some diplomatic mistakes. In the beginning of July Albania established diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia, and this act flamed a reaction in western countries like in Britain, Italy, and particularly in Yugoslavia.¹³⁹

In the beginning of December 1924 Zogu and his soldiers in Yugoslavia, being supported by Yugoslavian government, were making final preparations to intervene in Albania. Noli was aware about Zogu's plans, therefore he asked his ambassador in London to submit a complaining note to Foreign Office in regards to Yugoslav support for Zogu's actions.¹⁴⁰

Now, when Noli government informed British government about the projects for armed invasion in Albania, Foreign Office started to calculate needed actions to be taken in case Albania asks officially the intervention of League of Nations. Howard Smith expressed his view that Albania should not be encouraged to apply for a support to League of Nations, because this is a useless act since the Yugoslav Prime Minister, N. Pashic, would have taken needed actions with France and Italy and thus the League of Nations may be placed in an undesired position. On the other hand Nicolson proposed to control the situation and prevent from addressing it to League of Nations.¹⁴¹

But, there was as a reason behind British hesitations. Italy denied to enforce the authorization that the Conference of Ambassadors granted her in regards to Albania on 9 November 1921. Therefore, if Albania applies for a support in League of Nations and Italy fails to conduct its authorization, then the case to settle the situation will be addressed to Great Britain, and the High Majesty Government was not willing to play this role. Howard Smith was doubting about a possible secret agreement between Italy and Yugoslavia (ceding Yugoslav territories to Italy as a compensation for invasion of Yugoslavia to Thessaloniki), which may produce unpredicted situations particularly if France will support the claims of her ally – Yugoslavia. As a result Smith concluded that it would be a wrong action if the case is addressed to League of Nations and he proposed to treat the case of Albania as a random game in Balkans.¹⁴²

The lack of British involvement in League of Nations in favour of Albania meant a silent approval of Zogu's intervention in Albania, because in this way the territorial changes in Balkans would have been prevented.

On 20 December 1924 Albania submitted an official appeal to League of Nations against the invasion. The appeal was useless. Great Powers followed the suggestion of Nicolson regarding this issue: "*if Albania makes an appeal to League of Nations, we should delay the appeal...*".¹⁴³

Anyway, after the fall of Noli's government and after analysing circumstances of six months period of Noli's rule, the British diplomacy expressed an official stance on reasons for non-recognizing the

¹³⁸FO 371/9644 C 12787/12787/90, R. Parr to Foreign Office, 30 July, 1924, p. 340-342.

¹³⁹Piro Tako, *Fan Noli në fushën politike dhe publicistike*, Tiranë, 1975, p. 138.

¹⁴⁰Zh. Avramovski, "Qëndrimi i Anglisë ndaj qeverisë Noli në Shqipëri në vitin 1924", p. 178.

¹⁴¹FO 371/9640 C 18425/28/90, Foreign Office, 7 December 1924, p. 300-301.

¹⁴²FO 371/9640 C 18425/28/90, Foreign Office, 7 December 1924, p. 300-301.

¹⁴³W. Bland & I. Price, *A tangled web: A History of Anglo-American Relations with Albania (1912-1955)*, p. 26.

Noli government. The senior diplomat Lampson expressed two reasons why British government rejected the recognition of Noli's government: (1) it was a principle of British government to reject recognition of a government deriving from a revolutionary movement, unless this was not admitted by the majority of population through free elections, (2) Fan Noli issued a decree that prosecutes his opponents. Noli also didn't held elections so we had no information if his government would be recognized by his citizens. For those reasons the recognition was refused.¹⁴⁴

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¹⁴⁴FO 371/10654 C 111/52/90, Foreign Office, 29-30 December 1924, p. 3-5.