In Albania, new Turkish-funded mosque stirs old resentments

The Great Mosque of Tirana is being built in “neo-Ottoman” style—in a country that rebelled against Ottoman rule.

by Michael Colborne in the October 10, 2018 issue

The Great Mosque of Tirana, due to be completed next year, in the Albanian capital's city center. Photo by Michael Colborne, *The Christian Science Monitor.*

(*The Christian Science Monitor*) With its four minarets towering over the Albanian parliament next door, no visitor can miss the Great Mosque of Tirana.

When completed in 2019, the hulking new central mosque will be the biggest in the Balkans, with enough room for 5,000 worshipers. And it more closely resembles the great old mosques of Istanbul than any here in Albania, a country ruled by the Ottoman Empire for over four centuries.

That’s because Turkey is funding this mosque’s construction and overseeing its design, at an estimated cost of €30 million ($34 million), as it has done with dozens

across the Balkans and beyond.

Not all Albanians are happy about that—including many Muslims, who make up an estimated 60 percent of the population. Tirana's new central mosque has already become a symbol for those Muslims who feel like pawns in Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's great game.

Despite Albania's Muslim majority (the remainder includes 10 percent Roman Catholics and 7 percent Orthodox Christians), there have long been political undercurrents that view Islam as incompatible with being European, said Fatos Lubonja, a prominent Albanian intellectual.

During Albania's 19th-century national awakening, he explained, the nascent Albanian intellectual class suppressed religious identity in favor of a nonreligious nationalism: Albanianism. They chose a national hero, Skanderbeg, who spent decades fighting against Ottoman rule—and, thus, Islam—in the 1400s.

"Muslims here still feel frustrated because of their Muslim identity," said Lubonja, who spent 17 years as a political prisoner under communist dictator Enver Hoxha's regime. In Albania, "Islam has always been a synonym for backwardness, the religion of occupiers."

Today Albanian society remains largely secular, due in no small part to Hoxha's brutal rule over the country for more than 40 years. He proclaimed Albania an atheist state in 1967, and under his rule mosques across the country were abandoned, destroyed, or converted into museums. After communism collapsed in Albania in the early 1990s, many were reopened.

"While I don't care much for mosques, particularly not in an Ottoman style, for me the new mosque isn't the most terrible thing," Lubonja said. "Skyscrapers are the symbol of our new religion. Islam could become the religion of the poor, and be instrumentalized against new elites who claim to be European—those same corrupt elites who have promised to bring capitalism and modernity for over 20 years."

Tirana's Muslims have been asking for a new mosque for decades. According to Ilir Dizdari, the former head of the Albanian State Committee on Cults, which manages relations between religious communities and the state, today Tirana has the same number of mosques as it did in the 1960s, despite the city's population having quadrupled. After communism, many were left praying on the streets or in

Namazgah Park near the parliament building, a popular spot for outdoor prayers during Islamic festivals.

While new Catholic and Orthodox cathedrals were built with little controversy after the fall of communism, plans for a new mosque never got off the ground. After Albania's president Sali Berisha laid a foundation stone for a new mosque in 1992, the Roman Catholic speaker of the country's parliament protested the plans.

And so that foundation stone in Namazgah Park lay forgotten until 2010, when the mayor, Edi Rama, announced that a new, modernist mosque would finally be built. Rama's opponents accused him of playing to the Muslim vote before elections.

Rama became Albania's prime minister in 2013, and his dedication to a central mosque project coincided with Ankara's mosque-building campaign. The public debate around the mosque soon became a debate about Turkey and whether a mosque in "neo-Ottoman" style was the right fit in a country that takes great pride in having rebelled against Ottoman rule.

Even the most senior Muslim religious official in Albania, Grand Mufti Skënder Bruçaj, admitted that Turkey's role in the mosque project had been divisive. However, he stressed that the most important thing for him is that a central mosque is finally being built.

"If we had the money, we would have done something different," Bruçaj said in his offices opposite the construction site. "But things were decided before. . . . It's not easy for us."

Some remain irritated that their own government wasn't willing to fund it.

"The mosque was necessary, but it should have been built by the Albanian state," said one woman, who declined to give her name, after Friday prayers at the small Kokonozi Mosque near Tirana's old bazaar.

"That we were unable to build it shows that we are weak," remarked Gjoka Blebie, at Tirana's sprawling Skanderbeg Square. "Why not do it ourselves?"

Many Albanians wonder if the mosque is really for them at all. Niuton Mulleti, a lecturer in political science and international relations at Tirana's Epoka University, pointed out how unusual it was that Erdoğan himself appeared at the mosque's official groundbreaking ceremony in 2015.

“It would be unimaginable to see the president of Italy at the opening of a Catholic church,” Mulleti said, “and controversial to say the least to see the Greek prime minister at the opening of Tirana’s Orthodox Cathedral.”

The Turkish state, through its international development agency TI.KA, is also investing millions in restoring a handful of small Ottoman-era mosques throughout Albania. Such efforts are part of a long-standing strategy of Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party, which first came to power in 2002. Under the guidance of former Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Erdoğan embarked on a new approach to Turkish diplomacy that focused on exerting soft power, including parts of the Balkans with large Muslim populations.

That influence has recently served another purpose: Ankara is pressuring Balkan countries to hand over Turkish citizens deemed linked to the “Gülen terrorist organization”—as Turkey classifies the Islamic social movement led by Turkish preacher Fethullah Gülen—which it blames for a failed coup attempt in 2016.

In 2016, Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu even called Albania the “center” for Gülenist activities in the Balkans, while pro-government Turkish media has portrayed Grand Mufti Bruçaj as a Gülen supporter. After initially dragging its heels, Albania’s government has vowed to cooperate in Ankara’s crackdown since Erdoğan’s reelection. Prime Minister Rama recently reaffirmed his support to tackle the Gülen network.

While some see Erdoğan as a defender of Muslims across the Balkans and beyond, his increasingly autocratic model holds little appeal for Albanians who want eventually to join the European Union.

“Most Turks I know oppose Erdoğan,” Dorian Shatku said after prayers at Kokonozi Mosque.

Elton Hatibi, a researcher who has studied Islam in Albania, sees Albanian politicians’ “Turkophilia” as strategy rather than conviction.

“But people vote with their feet,” Hatibi said. “Albanians once moved to Istanbul to make their fortune. These days, they go to the EU to do real business and Turkey for holidays.”

Other Albanians have even less time for Erdoğan. In the park next door to the mosque, a group of older men playing chess are more than happy to share their opinions.

“Erdoğan is a dictator,” said Agim (who declined to provide a last name), an atheist who grew up in a Muslim family. “He’s worse than Enver Hoxha.”

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