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Political Regime and Electoral System in Albania: A Century after The First Parliamentary Republic

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Abstract: The article compares features of the political regime and electoral system between the first parliamentary republic in Albania from 1925 – 1928 and the democratic system of 2025. The analysis employs a comparative approach to search for similarities and differences between the two periods and also to map residual features in today's politics. The research considers components of political power, level of democracy, electoral process, governance, leadership and political parties' control, and citizens' participation. The results contribute to a deeper understanding of certain modern political dynamics and thereby offer insight for further development of a stronger pluralist and democratic system.

Keywords: Parliamentary regime; electoral system; democracy; Albania

1. Introduction and Literature

The political system by which the state governs is of crucial importance in political science studies. Political systems are the formal and informal political processes by which decisions are made concerning the use, production, and distribution of resources in any given society. (Scott and Mcloughlin, 2014) Therefore they imply the structure of a state, although as is cited by Amatrudo "the state is the most contested term in political theory and it is a topic covered extensively in the writings of political philosophers since classical times, and certainly Plato, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke and Marx are only a few of the writers who have tackled the subject of the state." (Amatrudo, 2009, p. 2). Albania, as part of the global trend of political regime transformations, experienced several type of systems throughout its existence as a state over the years, until 1925, when by law the Parliamentary Republic form was constituted, and hasn't changed to the modern day. From a political point of view, is crucial to understand the evolution of the regime over 100 of years, linked to the historical context and cultural change. Hence, this article is focused on analysing the functioning of the political regime and its components concerning the period the parliamentary republic was sanctioned and the modern type of parliamentary republic. The components in focus are the political and electoral system, political parties, the positioning of the dominant and opposition parties in the political arena, as well as the position and political voters' space. In theory, the analysis of these factors helps to examine how much democracy is developed in a country (based on the concept of Dahl, 1971, and Schumpeter, 1947, with a focus on the

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minimal requirements for democracy). Furthermore, electoral and political system stand as a vital component in political representativeness and power distribution within the system, because of their role in understanding the way the political representation and the power is balanced (Chiaramonte, 2020, p. 161), as also the leader's control, candidates and political parties role in generating electoral reforms and influencing citizens political and voting participation (Norris, 2004). All of the above mentioned mechanisms' development, jointly to the political and governance competition, depend on democracy level, from authoritarian to democratic composition. Today world displays a form of hybrid regimes, a mixture of democratic and autocratic institutional features (Schmotz, 2019), underlined by the third wave of autocratization and democracy decline (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). Hybrid regimes are considered intermediate systems or unconsolidated democracies, which require system improvements. Their mixed patterns are in between the prohibition to freedom of expression, political participation, political competition, multiparty system existence, etc. (Menocal et al., 2008; Cassani & Tomini, 2019; Lijphart, 2012).

2. Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The main purpose of this article is to examine the component level of the present political reality, focusing on the comparison and evolution of these features between two time-frame periods, the 1925-1928 and the current 2021-2025. The common basis for comparison the denominator is the "parliamentary republic" system. The three years from 1925-1928 constitute the period in which Albania first sanctioned and established the form parliamentary republic regime. The analysis is mainly based on a comparative methodology, focusing on similarities and differences between the two parliamentary republics. The examination offers an in-depth overview of the transformations and challenges faced by both systems considered, and the possible influence and residual features of the first regime on the development of the current democratic system of Albania. The factors under analysis are the political regime, the electoral process and system, the governance system, political parties, the power of the political leader, the voter political space, and their perceptions. These features are associated to the development of the country's democracy. In addition, this analysis seeks to also identify as much as possible the elements that are remnants and inherited from the past to the present political system, a century later in 2025. The article is based on qualitative literature of expert studies, official documents, media sources, reports, as well as on statistical data, including primary data from a survey conducted in 2024 by the Institute for Political Studies, and also data provided by the experts in the Varieties of Democracy Institute. The contribution of this research relies mostly in the examination of the legacy of the first parliamentary system of the past, in shaping the contemporary political and dynamic of the Albanian regime, as well as analysis the current regime features in Albania and the probable interventions to improve the democracy function in overall, as improving separate features of the political regime, such as strengthening of the pluralist party system and the opposition role, increase the citizens genuine participation in politics, better reinforce of the administrative institutions, etc. One of the main objectives of today's Albania is to overcome the current status of status quo classification as a hybrid democratic regime, part of a global trend of democracy decline.

3. Political Regime and Democracy

The present regime of Albania is a Parliamentary Republic (Kushtetuta e Republikës Së Shqipërisë, Pjesa I, Neni. 1). The Parliamentary Republic form of regime was constituted for the first time in the

constitutional Assembly in 2 march 1925, by approving the "Fundamental Statute of the Albanian Republic, proclaiming for the first time Albania a Republic, headed by a President the sovereignty of whom come from the people (Statuti Themeltar i Republikës Shqiptare (1925), Kaptinë I, Pjesa A, pika. 1). In both cases in comparison the regime is parliamentary specified in the respected decrees, both regimes share the common form of electing the President, and also regarding the political system, they share the common feature of following the type of governance trend of the period in which they function. Therefore, the current system in all the Balkan countries is similar, as it was in the years of the first parliamentary Republic of 1925-1928. Zogu's system model followed the line extension from the republican system establishment in Turkey, and in principle, it had fundamental differences with the competitive democratic system of most European countries (Krasniqi, 2009: 81). Thus, in the context of the standard of decentralization of power, the democratic regime encountered obstacles to application.

In terms of democracy, the period of 1925-1928 under the regime of Zogu displays features of authoritarianism and concentration of power (Fischer & Schmitt, 2022, p. 191). The leader had almost absolute power, and the government was entirely controlled by him, because he was simultaneously president, prime minister, minister of interior, political leader, decision-maker of political changes, and had control over military power. (Anastasi, 1998). Thus, practically distanced the regime from the republican parliamentary model. Meanwhile, the current state of the Albanian democracy is a hybrid or transitional (Freedom House, 2025), belongs to the grey zone of electoral democracies, ranked with countries such as Kenya, Mexico and Nigeria (Marina et. al., 2025, p. 13), and faces problematic issues related to the local and central governance and legal framework" (Bërdufi, 2024, p. 311). Similarly, Albania, despite the differences in the policies' execution, has not changed in its core of following the authoritarianism trend in the Western Balkans and globally. (Bieber, 2018, 2020; Cassani & Tomini, 2018; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). As cited by Bërdufi and Krasniqi "the over-reliance on strong leaders, the growing government control over public life and the confirmation of the power of political majorities through problematic elections held in the absence of any accountability, as part of a trend that is visible both in Albania and in the region, combined with the weakening of watchdog institutions, civil society and citizens' voices and critical media, eroded the very social basis of a functioning democracy." (Bërdufi & Krasniqi, 2022, p. 42). Consequently, a phenomenon recurring in time is the presence of strong and powerful individuals or groups influencing policies or activities, especially in electoral cases. Under these conditions, difficulties are faced in the development of political processes completely free from the interests and business interference. These and other factors that will be discussed below suggest that Albania still needs improvements in its democratic process, in spite of the fact that it has passed one hundred years of Parliamentary Republic and besides of twenty-four years of democracy after the fall of the communist system in 1990. These conditions do not allow the regime to become fully democratic and the system to operate effectively.

Despite the criticism, it is important to highlight a very positive aspect inherited from the 1925-1928 regime of the system, setting out strong fundamentals for the public institutions, a legacy for political institutions, ensured public order, and safety and state structure, by producing stability in some features that are still functional nowadays. One of the main benefits for today's systems for Albanian citizens from a legal perspective is the reform approving the Penal and Civil Code (Shqiptarja, 19 April 2015). Furthermore, "the parliament of these years approved many reforms for the economic development of the country, reforming institutions, help for the local businesses and Albanian associations, introduction of fiscal relief incentives in importing corn and wheat for the population affected by low income, etc." (Tafili & Boseta, 2021; Kalemaj & Koci, 2023, p. 28). These reforms and progress are factors that contribute to the increase of the citizens' trust in institutions. Moreover, it stimulates the continuous

demand for better genuine transparency, which is still a present request in the activity of the Albanian governance and democratic institutions.

As a final point, considering the V-Dem data about the level of democracy indicators, for both periods under analysis (Figure 1), as expected, there is an improvement after 100 years. Nevertheless, in interpreting this result, we should consider the difference in time and situations of factor influencing. Although, in both cases, Albania is considered more as an electoral democracy than a participatory one, thus fulfilling the basic principles of a functional democracy. Consequently, as stated above, even though 100 years have passed since the first parliamentary Republic, and considering the positive developments, the Albanian democracy still needs to fulfill the basic criteria for democracy as conceptualized by Dahl (1971), and subsequently to further develop in all the democratic dimensions.

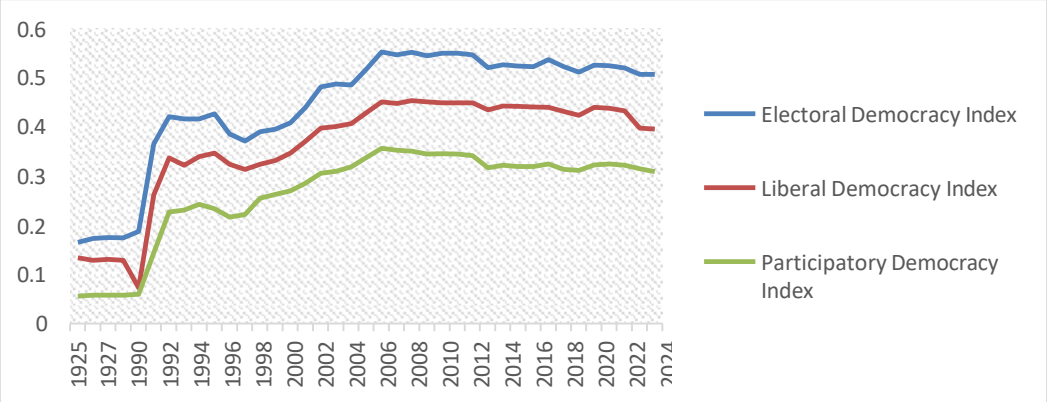


Figure 1. Democracy Indicators for Albania, V-Dem Data Version 15

Source: V-Dem Institute, 2025. Graphing Tools for Albania, https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph

4. Electoral Process and System

The electoral system of 1925-1928 is unique in the history of the Albanian parliamentary system, because it was formed by two parliamentary chambers, "The Chamber of Deputies and Senate" (Fundamental Statute of the Albanian Republic, 1925). Differently, the actual parliament consists of only one chamber. (Kuvendi, Republika e Shqipërisë). Regarding the electoral law of the Republic of Zogu, it was decreed on 14 March 1925 (Albanian Parliament), and in general presents some characteristics analogous to and other diverse from the present electoral law. Different, the present includes all the social groups as voters, instead in 1925, groups such as women, the army, the police, beggars, prisoners, etc. were excluded from voting. Similarly, candidates for certain high public posts have to resign from their duties before candidacy. In terms of the Law, the electoral law did not prevent any individual candidacy if they met the criteria for a parliament deputy. (Academy of Albanological Studies Institute of History, 2022, p. 23). The last component implies *de jure*, a somewhat democratic feature. In the present day, the electoral system, after continuous changes, has been determined to be a proportional regional system (Electoral Code of Albania, updated in 2025). Although the 19 competitive elections took place after the fall of communism, for every single election there has been criticism of the electoral process and interference in order to win one or the other candidate. As expressed in the latest valuation by Freedom House "Albania has a record of competitive elections, though political parties are highly polarized and often organized around leading personalities" (Freedom House, 2025).

Election process also, in the Zogu Republic, are considerably characterized by the leader's control (Vllamasi, 2012), process manipulation, lack of real competition, lack of transparency and violation of the freedom of vote. Therefore, the core principle of democratic elections is damaged.

Under this perspective, both periods' results with common components. The present regime, despite the influence of the contemporary factors, is probably also composed of remnants of the past regarding the electoral system and the electoral process. These features include the possible cases of election manipulation and external influences by strong or powerful people on the vote. Furthermore, the use of human and state resources to conduct election campaigns is a common negative feature of both periods. Meanwhile, a positive value is positively being the fact that the electoral system of the Zogu period has served as a good groundwork for future electoral systems, which have been improved over time and have managed to increase the representation of citizens in parliament and government. Likewise, positive characteristics have also been noticed toward the overall demand from political actors to improve the features of holding free and fair elections, observed still in the present, by fulfilling the requests of democracy and also from international actors.

Statistical data from V-Dem in regard to the level of elections index for both periods under analysis (Figure 2), emphasize the above analysis. Considering several features regarding the elections, such as all three election process periods (pre-election, election day and post-election), and other electoral aspects such as voter intimidation, abuse of power of the ruling party against the media and other parties, freedom of vote, it is clear that the electoral process in 1925-1928 is characterized by patterns of repression, manipulation and pressure from the ruling party. Meanwhile, currently these indicators show improvement, signifying greater freedom of the media and opposition parties, as well as lower levels of intimidation practices. However, from the data and the analysis so far, it appears that there is still potential for progression, especially concerning media freedom and the complete transparency of all components of the electoral process.

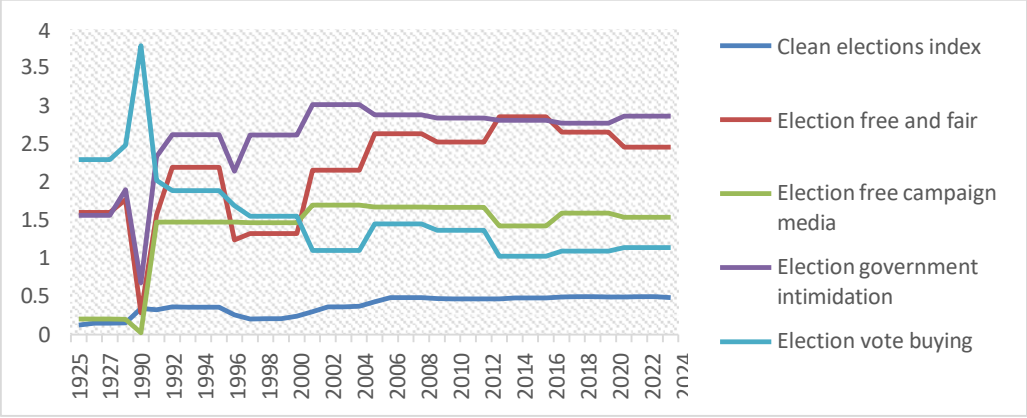


Figure 2. Election Indicators for Albania, V-Dem Data Version 15

Source: V-Dem Institute, 2025. Graphing Tools for Albania, https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph/

5. Governance and Political Parties

Regarding the party system and political parties, Zogu's regime, as experts' data display (Figure 3) is characterized by a high control of the ruling party, almost complete limitation of candidates and their selection, as well as the engagement of the opposition (which emigrated out of the country due to

punishments), and barriers to the formation of political parties. Thus, the system reflected a lack of pluralism (Omari, 2000). Furthermore, in the parliament of 1925-1928, there were no deputies for leader critics, there were no competitive political groups in the official list for the parliamentary and local elections, thus the election transformed into a just formal institution. (Krasniqi, 2008, p. 86). As a result, the governance and parliament reinforced authoritarian features, and the government was in control of the leader. Meanwhile, data on the previous Albanian government of 2021-2025, get to reinforces the perspective of the progress in the autonomy of opposition parties, the selection of candidates, the decline of restrictions and barriers to the formation of political parties.

Even though the dissimilarities in the level of system control, there are common features between the two periods about political parties, such as cases of restrictions in competition and equal competition among political parties or candidates, the lack of real landscape for new political parties, retractions in entering the parliament sanctioned by law (the present Law states a minimum threshold for entering parliament for the parties and candidates). Lastly, regardless of the high number of legally registered and formally operating in a pluralist system, there are only two dominant parties in Albania: the Democratic Party and the Socialist Party of Albania (PS is actually in its fourth mandate of governance (CEC, 2025). Although of the aspects discussed above and regardless of the different ways of political approach between the two periods, there is a common basis of demand for the creation of political stability, which encompass from the type of obligatory stability for the stakeholders involved, up to types of demands and stabilizing reforms to facilitate exiting from a hybrid democracy political system. Still, since none of the indicators are at the optimal level, the political system and political actors as part of the electoral system still need to progress further.

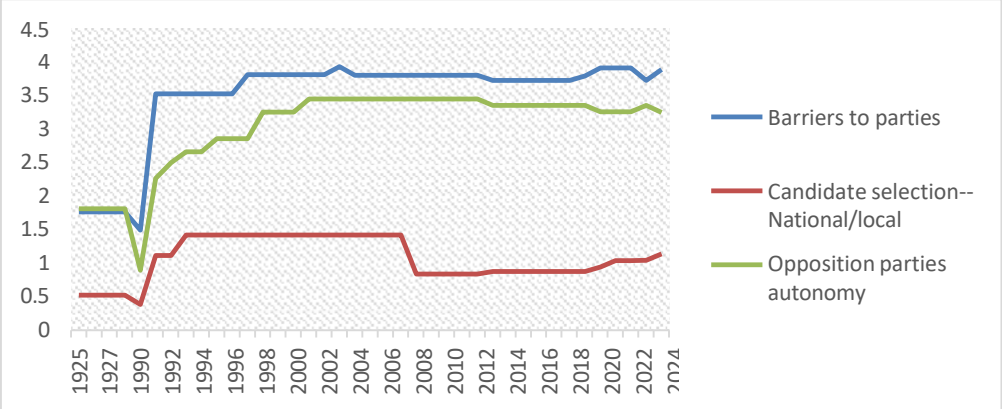


Figure 3. Political Parties and Candidate Indicators for Albania, V-Dem Data Version 15

Source: V-Dem Institute, 2025. Graphing Tools for Albania, https://v-dem.net/data_analysis/CountryGraph

6. Citizen Political Participation

Even with the problems and limitations of the first republic's voting system, it contributed to the development of certain mechanisms for citizen participation in the electoral process. Formally the framework of the electoral legislation upholds for democratic rules and independence of vote protection by prescribing "punishment of anyone who commits actions against the integrity of the electoral process, such as interfering with voter lists, obstructing their registration, damaging ballot boxes, casting more than one vote in the ballot box, voting on behalf of other persons, damaging electoral documents, etc."

(Academy of Albanological Studies, Institute of History, 2022, pp. 23-24). These procedures for protecting vote integrity, however, even though in a more comprehensive form, are still considered important in the Electoral Code of Albania (Law No. 10 019, dated 29.12.2008), in support of the democratic functioning of the electoral process. The range of similarities in the citizens' perspective expands to their apathy in voting, as well as election irregularities, lack of program alternatives, and the informal involvement of individuals holding public offices, with the intent to influence the election results.

In support of the above analysis, the following statistical data provides a more subjective perspective on the Albanian voters' perceptions, based on primary data from a national-level survey conducted in 2024. In general, regarding the actual electoral and political issues, according to Krasniqi and Bërdufi (2024, p. 06) citizens demand more democratic and transparent parties, the clear separation from criminal or informal connections and financing, the refuse of pressures and report of legal violations by parties in the campaign and higher quoting of the candidates' program as an electoral quality. Specifically, some of their opinions or perceptions reflected numerically are: 79% think that parties should be obliged by law to hold internal party elections; 63% think that political parties do not represent the interests of citizens; 87% of citizens want the rejection of candidates/parties that utilize pressure in the campaign; 74% of citizens think that the candidate's program should be decisive for the vote; 65% support the application of 100% of open lists in the 2025 elections; 60% support the idea of more independent/new candidates; 74% support the ban on criminal/informal party financing; 51% support the idea of creating new parties for competitive plurality; 72% support the ban on politicians that are in actual investigation from SPAK (Special Anticorruption and Organized Crime Unit). The voters perceive that the actual system does not fulfill the standards of a completely functional democracy. The situation states that although a century later, a range of issues continues to recur, reflecting that the system still has structural deficits in implementing democratic electoral standards.

Moreover, concerning the electoral system, citizens express worries about the way the system functions (Figure 4). The system is perceived by 40% of the respondents to make MPs dependent on the party leader. The rest of the perception is divided between 10% who believe that the system increases competition for candidates for MPs, 8% who believe that the system enables new individuals to enter politics, and 7% who believe that the electoral system makes MPs financially dependent on donors.

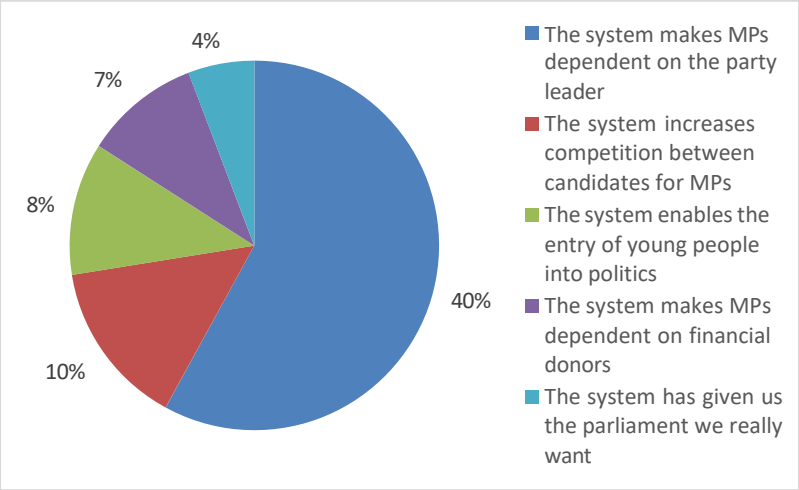


Figure 4. Voter Support for the Assessment of the Current Electoral / Representative System

This fact is supported by the citizens' evaluation in regard to their freedom to vote and to elect (Figure 5). Only half of them expressed a positive support for freedom, while the rest perceived themselves as not being free or partially free to choose in this vital decision-making process. The data also supports the evaluation by Freedom House, which ranks Albania as a hybrid regime. Furthermore, as discussed in this article about reforms and improvements, despite the time and historic situation evolution, similar issues still come into focus in the survey results of the contemporary system, in the voter perception of what are the priority requirements that the government must resolve in the next five years (figure 6). The main perceived problems are the education modernization, the fight against corruption, strengthening the rule of law, and reducing the power of oligarchs. These results reinforce the fact that although a century later, and continues progressive reforms, the electoral system is still not perfect and needs to be adjusted in some aspects, such as the facilitate access in politic participation, representation increase, and separation of candidates or MPs from illegal or addictive funding, aiming to implement a fully functional democratic regime.

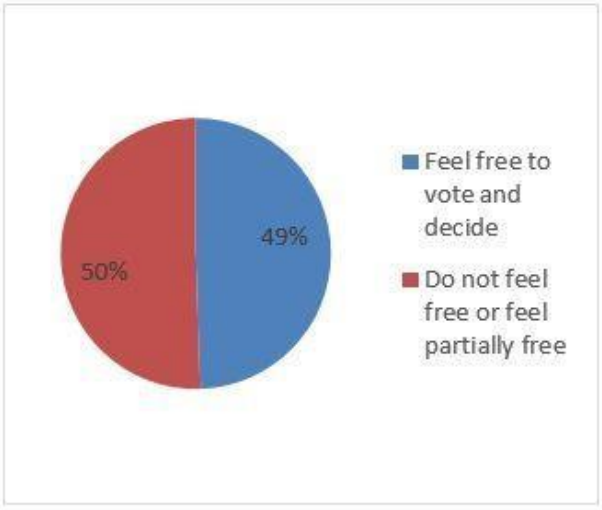


Figure 5: Freedom to vote and decide

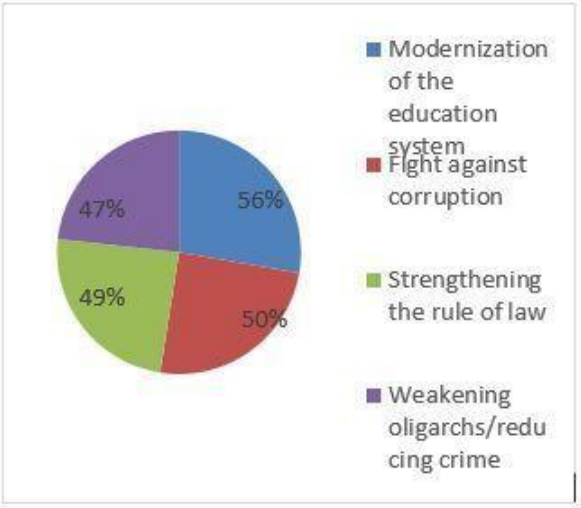


Figure 6. The main priorities to be resolved in the next 5 years

7. Conclusion

Through the comparison of the political regime and electoral system between the period of the first Albanian Republic (1925–1928) and modern parliamentary democratic system in Albania (2025), obviously, despite the one hundred years of passage, several elements from the first parliamentary system persist nowadays, such as centralized power and strong leader, influence of political groups, low citizens participation in politic, election manipulations and election process difficulties, etc. Besides these, the analysis demonstrates improvements, such as political and party pluralism, freedom of expression, creating an electoral culture, political representation, developing strong institutions, an electoral system, and setting the groundwork for developing a democratic regime. Even though some of the challenges, such as citizens' trust in institutions, politics, strengthening the rule of law, and improving transparency, need further consolidation to achieve an overall democratic political system and better-quality institutional functioning of the political process.

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