



# Hafiz Sabri Koçi and the Islamic Revival in Post-Communist Albania

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**Abstract:** In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Albania became exposed to a form of communist rule that lasted nearly 45 years. With the Albanian Labor Party coming into power under the leadership of Enver Hoxha in 1944, the government gradually developed a hostile stance against religion and all forms of religious practice. This also included atheism being designated as the state ideology in 1967, followed by a deep and widespread deprivation of basic human rights such as freedom of belief and its expression. Religious structures in the country were destroyed, with many religious leaders being imprisoned, exiled, or killed under unknown circumstances. Hafiz Sabri, a renowned imam, leading civic justice figure, and religious activist in Albania, was also subject to these dangers. His significant work in the civic and religious scenes led to him being imprisoned for over 20 years on account of the communist regime charging him with treason. Released during the waning years of communist rule, Sabri returned to his work and played a crucial role in reconstructing religious structures in Albania after a democratic multi-party system was introduced between 1990-1991. Using state and personal archives, memoirs, and interviews with Sabri's contemporaries, this paper maps the trajectories of Albania's difficult transition from communism to democracy, with a focus on the important role Sabri Koçi played in developing Islamic religious structures in Albania in the post-communist period. This paper further discusses the intense struggles during and following the communist period, as well as Sabri's significant role in reshaping Albanian society and history.

**Keywords:** Albania, communism, official policies, Hafiz Sabri Koçi, social structure, democratic transition, freedom of religion

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## Introduction

On November 28, 1912 under the leadership of Ismail Kemal, Albania declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire (Jelavich, 2006, p. 105), after which a transition government was established. During this period of state uncertainty, Albania suffered many economic losses that involved the invasion and theft of territories by neighboring countries in addition to other transgressions. Enver Hoxha used the government's failings to legitimize an unofficial ceremony in which he, followed by his supporters, stormed Tirana in the name of liberating the country from foreign powers. His leadership of the movement resulted in his appointment as the leader of the Labour Party and a year later as prime minister during the elections, thereby marking the start of the communist era that would last 46 years (Prifti & Biberaj, 2017).

During this period, the police force and military apparatus radically suppressed free speech, thought, and movement. Such enforcements included but were not limited to labor camps (a form of Nazi concentration camps), the inability to leave the country, and rejection of all religions, this last one being the one to which this paper will bring attention. Through such enforcements, the communist regime used anti-religious rhetoric and propaganda from the moment it came into power until 1967 (Baklacioğlu, 2007, pp. 365–374), wherein such rhetoric was transferred into constitutional change and the subsequent rejection of all religious beliefs and practices for the remainder of Hoxha's leadership. Thus in 1967, the Republic of Albania became the world's first and only constitutionally atheist state (Qazimi, 2012, p. 112), which led to a system resulting in numerous negative consequences in all realms of the domestic society, particularly in the country's religious structure. Ulema and citizens alike were imprisoned, exiled, and murdered while texts, libraries, mosques, churches and cultural education centers were destroyed in the name of Albania's new ideology. Only through the transition to a democratic system in 1991 was Albania once again able to see freedom in all manners of society, particularly through means of travel as well as the ability to publish and express religious beliefs (Baklacioğlu, 2007 p. 383). This in turn led to the rebuilding of religious structures and the reconstruction of Islamic institutions under the leadership of Hafiz Sabri Koçi, as this paper will discuss in further detail.

## Hafiz Sabri Koçi and His Early Life

Born in a small city, Sabri started his life's journey studying in Shkoder, which is considered the center of knowledge in the Balkans, in order to build a strong foundation for his intellectual development. He at the time struggled personally, as he also had to care for his family. However, this did not constrain him too much, and he was able to manage both.

Hafiz Sabri Koçi was born on May 14, 1921 in the village of Orenje in the city of Librazhd (Zekaj, 2007 p. 369). Sabri, whose father had passed away when he was born, was raised and educated by his mother. After living in Librazhd for some time, his mother decided to move to Shkodra, where he completed his education (Luli & Dizdari, 1996, p. 11). With the privilege of being in a city nicknamed *Mehdu'l ilm* [the cradle of knowledge] and known as the center of knowledge, civilization, and culture throughout the Balkans (Luli & Dizdari, 1996, p. 13), Sabri was educated with one-on-one training from his masters Muhammed Bekteshi (1883-1958) (Luli, Dizdari & Bushati, 1997, pp. 281–298), Hafiz Sabri Bushati (1889-1971) (Luli, Dizdari & Bushati, 1997, pp. 347–364), Hafiz Ibrahim Kaduku (1869-1949) (Komuniteti Mysliman I Shqiperise [Muslim Community of Albania], 2013, pp. 84–95), Sheh Qazim Hoxha (1893-1959) (Luli, Dizdari & Bushati, 1997, pp. 183–186), and Hafiz Shaban Dornori (1868-1934) (Luli, Dizdari & Bushati, 1997, pp. 150–152).

Apart from being known for standing out with his bright intelligence and hardworking personality throughout his education, he was constantly assigned by his teachers to serve as a muezzin (Bala, 2005, p. 292) at different mosques. His education lasted for 15 years and involved a mix of basic Islamic sciences such as the Quran, hadith, tafsir, fiqh [Islamic jurisprudence], and philosophy. In addition to memorizing the Quran, Sabri also successfully completed his education and graduated in 1951 with an ijaza, the traditional license to teach Islamic studies, with authorization from his supervisor, Haxhi Muhammed Bekteshi (Luli & Dizdari, 1996, p. 15).

In addition to all this, he also engaged his interests in construction and learned about all aspects of plumbing in order to earn a living for his family. He utilized these skills and worked from a very young age. His only constraint during this period occurred when the communist rule imprisoned him.

His first official job started in the Drisht village mosque in 1937 (Luli & Dizdari, 1996, p. 18). After working there for a year, he went on to work in



Çukurçeşme; the White Mosque (Xhamia e Bardhe), Paçram village mosque, Shkodra Dudas district mosque, and Rus Mosque in Shkoder; the Kruja city mosque and ministry in Tirana; the Ali Hajdar Mosque in the city of Kavaja; and then again in the Rus Mosque (pp. 20–22).

When looking at the places he was employed, Hafiz Sabri is seen in the first years of his career to have worked within his city or surrounding villages. As his employment allowed him to meet people organically, the regime started to assign him to small cities or villages rather than to the capital city of Tirana where he was based. Sending him to smaller cities in particular would keep him away from other youths and limit his interactions with society. These efforts, however, were mostly unsuccessful.

During the transition to constitutional atheism, Sabri's work was considered an obstacle to the system, as his work consisted of religious education which was in opposition to the state's policy on religion. Therefore, he played an active role during the first years of the communist rule. After this transition, the regime attempted to establish control over Albanian society, which resulted in Sabri constantly facing various pressures. Sabri stated in an interview:

They pressured me not to talk too much because I was harming people and the state by talking. Although they had all kinds of propaganda tools at their disposal, they found me very dangerous. Sometimes I would try to be careful, but covering the truth was against my personality. (as cited in Luli & Dizdari, 1996, p. 21)

These pressures peaked when he was serving in the Rus Mosque, where he worked between 1957-1966. During these years, the regime took a clear stance against religion through the constitution, and its efforts to destroy all kinds of religious structures increased daily. Despite this, Sabri's work continued without change. Among his various works during this period, what he was focused on the most was his interest in young people and women's active participation in mosques and was one of the first imams to do so (Velija, 2017). Because women did not attend mosques often, Sabri started trying to organize private lessons for them. As an advocate of the idea that educating society and religiously educating new generations are strongly related to women's education, he did his utmost to support the movement and make this possible both religiously and socially.

Another very important aspect of his work was the fact that he was always focused on facilitating the practice of religion. Among many other

issues, he was intensively focused and very meticulous about explaining in Albanian the meaning of the prayers that were said in Arabic so that everyone would be able to understand.

This effort of his can be considered as a preventive measure that he took against all the political processes of the country. In the following years, a war against all religions almost occurred, and everything that was considered anti-nationalist was doomed to be destroyed. In this context, explaining Arabic prayers in Albanian can be considered more of a political step rather than a practical one. Sabri said:

In 1945, the reaction against religion began to increase. Humbly, I used to organize different programs at the mosque and try to keep people together. I had organized Quran, hadith, and religion lessons for children, elders, and women, and we worked every day on a schedule. At the same time, we used to worship together with the public until the morning on holy nights and Eid nights. At that time, no public accusation had been made against me; indeed, religion had not been officially banned yet, but checks and reports were constantly being given about everything I did. (as cited in Luli & Dizdari, 1996, p. 21)

Pressure especially increased when the new constitution was enacted in 1946 and anti-religious sanctions became official. During this period, Koçi was working in the Dudas and Rus districts of Shkodra and was intensely followed and exposed to even more pressure due to being in the city. In the following period, he was exiled and sent to smaller cities such as Kruje and Kavaja, but with the Muslim community of Shkoder insisting for him to return, he went back to Shkodra and continued his work there up until his arrest.

His warrant for arrest was issued on June 6, 1966. He was arrested along with several imams and teachers from the city after leading the Friday prayer at the mosque. The first mosque to be closed during this period was the one where he used to work. He was accused of betraying his country and was assumed to be opposed to the state, as he'd helped some youth go abroad, which was forbidden by the constitution. Additionally, he was accused of creating hatred among people toward the current administration and causing citizens' productivity at work to decrease by keeping them busy in the mosque until late hours. This was considered economic sabotage. Despite the absurdity of the claims, all charges against him were passed, and all these accusations were considered valid (Luli & Dizdari, 1996, p. 35).



The trial of Hafiz Sabri was made public, as well as his arrest. Through a loudspeaker, everyone was able to listen to what happened. This was another propaganda tool used by the regime in order to make everyone feel threatened and see the consequences they would have to face if anyone else tried to contradict the state and their policies. As a result of Sabri's indictment, the accusations, the questions from the judge, the evidence, and even the sentence, all of which had been predetermined, Sabri was declared guilty on September 10, 1966 by a general decision of the court on the following grounds according to Penal Code No. 34:

- He was sentenced to 18 years in prison for economic sabotage against his country.
- He was sentenced to 16 years in prison for betraying the state, from which he was about to flee.
- He was sentenced to 10 years in prison for agitation and propaganda against the state.

As a result, he was sentenced to a total of 22 years in prison and 5 years without the right to vote. This was claimed to be the only way to stop him after 18 years of service to the Muslim community and Albanian society. The prison sentences that were given are worth mentioning to have not only affected him and other prisoners. He had had six children by the time he was imprisoned, and they also dealt with the hardship of having their father away from them and in prison.

1966-1967 was when the sanctions against religions reached their ultimate peak, and many clergymen were imprisoned, exiled, or killed during Sabri's time. Moreover, although the cultural origins of the society did not allow this, the official religious ideology of the country had now become determined to have atheism, and the government's clear and violent stance on this matter began to have frightening consequences.

## **Hafiz Sabri Koçi as a Prisoner**

The prisons of the communist regime are considered to have been places where the prisoners were forced to work and have their psychological well-being violated. Initially, Sabri was at the camp in Fushe-Kruje. Later he would be transferred to the camp in Spaç, which was considered the place where the most dangerous prisoners were sentenced. In both places, Sabri oversaw plumbing work, which is something he had learned in his younger years.

When taking a look at the period of Sabri's imprisonment, what draws the most attention is the fact that despite the difficult conditions that had made any kind of religious manifestation illegal, Sabri was very careful and strict with his worship and surrender to God:

Allah wanted things to develop in this way, and it was up to me to surrender as His servant. I have never sought forgiveness or asked someone for help. I had not done anything but the right thing. Allah wanted to test me in that way, and I leaned on Him, and I was willing to accept help only from Him. (Luli & Dizdari, 1996, p. 46)

**Sabri also mentioned the prayer facilities in prison as follows:**

We were constantly being observed by the guards. Any manifestation of religion and worship meant one step closer to death. Because I was doing my job, I was given a small room where I was supposed to put my working supplies. I used to perform my daily prayer there. During the month of Ramadan, I would just go to the dining hall in the evening, buy a piece of bread, and put it in my pocket. The bread was usually 800 grams. Once, I saw lard being rubbed on trays in the refectory. After that day, I ate the bread by cutting off the part where it touched the pan, and under these conditions, I passed exactly 20 months of Ramadan in prison. (Luli & Dizdari, 1996, p. 47)

Nonetheless, he never lost his stability in fulfilling his worship while remaining an inspiration for other people. Christian leader Dom Simon Jubani had been punished in the same period as Sabri and stated:

Hafiz Sabri was working in the renovation and electrical works. It was his thoroughness in his work that caught our attention. He never neglected anything, paying attention to even the smallest details. Even though he had been charged for nothing wrong, he completed his punishment without the slightest complaint, as if it had come from God himself, not from the communist regime. Once, we were sent somewhere to work, and he was forgotten outside by the guardians because of the high number of prisoners. Despite having an opportunity to escape, he came back to prison on his own feet.

We sat and chatted with him a lot. We all had a common goal. Every individual in the country should have freedom of religion, and if there was any punishment to be taken for this cause, we were ready to take it. We helped everyone in need with all the means we could. Together we would celebrate each other's holidays and visit them a lot. (Luli & Dizdari, 1996, p. 41)

Sabri's communications with everyone demonstrate high levels of solidarity and mutual aid, and the extensions of this bond can be seen after the



communism period, during which all these names that have been mentioned would take leading roles in the organizing of their own religious groups and the reconstruction process.

Another point to mention is the families of the prisoners. To say that they had gone through many difficulties and most of the time would be persecuted and harassed is important. In addition to the economic difficulties that made visiting him once a month as they had wanted to do difficult, the prison authorities would often find various excuses to prevent his family from seeing him. Sometimes his kids would come to visit him, and even though he portrayed himself as being very strong, days were needed for him to emotionally recover after being visited by his family, as his son stated in an interview.<sup>21</sup> About a year after being imprisoned, Sabri's mother passed away, leaving Sabri's wife as the only one to take care of his kids. During his imprisonment, Sabri thought of compiling his ideas into a book, but his efforts in this regard failed as a result of various restrictions, and he was only able to manage having a small notebook left with him.

## **Hafız Sabri Koçi's Post-Communist Struggle**

After living in prison for 20 years, 4 months, and 18 days, Hafız Sabri Koçi was released in 1986. However, his life was still not entirely free, as the country was still ruled by the communist regime, and Sabri was constantly being monitored as he was considered a danger to the state. If he made even the slightest mistake, he would again face the same consequences and be imprisoned for a second time.<sup>32</sup>

In terms of his personal and family life after prison, his mother was no longer alive, and his children were full-grown adults. Because working as an imam was no longer possible, he started working in a construction factory despite his old age. During this period, he also started organizing youths and setting the foundations for a religious revival in the country.

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2 1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5gYVdWn0cU&t=1264s>

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## The First Mosque Inauguration

The leadership of Hafiz Sabri Koçi played a key role in the revival of religious structures in Albania after the communism period. He became the one to lead this process upon being set free, and after intensive work with the citizens of Shkoder, the first mosque in the country was opened on November 16, 1990. Starting with the Friday prayer, Albanians from this moment on would be able to practice their beliefs after almost half a century of oppression and lack of freedom. This ceremony was attended by 55,000 people regardless of religion, which Shkodra Police Chief Dilaver Papara recorded as follows:

The official ceremony started at 11 a.m. with the speech of Sabri Koçi, who'd been imprisoned and sentenced for 22 years for agitation and propaganda. The religious rituals continued inside the mosque at around 1:00 p.m. There was immense silence when Sabri Koçi made his speech. The people attending the ceremony were not ordinary. From their appearances, they were clearly decent people, and people from other religions were also there.<sup>43</sup>

Even the state officials who were ready to intervene simply appeared unable to because they were shocked by the magnificence of this view. Sabri stated in his speech:

Dear believers, siblings. For me, living this day means coming back to life. For years, I see hearts burning out of love for Allah and the Prophet. For years, we have been deprived of our religion and beliefs. Taking freedom of religion from people is like trying to destroy their souls and thoughts. However, it is appropriate to return the good only with kindness. Therefore, we say that they can never extinguish the light of Allah and we refer to Allah what they do. Reaching these days is a great blessing for us. I wholeheartedly congratulate everyone who has helped us experience this day, who served it, and who touched the slightest service for this cause.<sup>54</sup>

The opening of *Xhamia e Plumbit* [The Lead Mosque] was followed by the opening ceremonies of the surrounding village mosques of Shkodra, followed by the mosques of other cities and villages after that year. Sabri took care of all these openings personally and followed this process from beginning to end. Within five years, more than 400 mosques had been opened in the cities and surrounding villages.

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## **The Establishment of the Albanian Muslim Community**

The reactivation of religious centers in the country had started with the opening of the The Lead Mosque but were not enough to meet the people's need for religion. Therefore, an effort to establish the Albanian Muslim Community immediately occurred. On the same day that the first mosque was opened, a meeting took place in which the decision was made to establish the Albanian Muslim Community with Shkoder as its center (Basha, 2012).

Hereby, once the first meeting was held on November 16, 1990, the founding purpose, objectives, and programs of the community were determined. Afterwards, the Albanian Muslim Community that had been forced to stop its work in 1967 had regained its right to restart its activities on January 23, 1991 by taking all the necessary official steps according to the decision made by the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Albania.

After the Community initiated its activities in the country, many meetings with other communities from neighboring countries were organized. On February 14, 1991, the first large meeting officially organized by the Albanian Muslim Community was held in the Ali Kelmendi Cultural Hall in Tirana with the participation of councils from different cities and the participation of representatives from the sister communities of Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro. This meeting discussed the status of the Albanian Muslim Community among many other issues, and the board of directors was selected as a result. At the same meeting, Hafiz Sabri Koçi was officially elected as the Leader of the Albanian Muslim Community, which had automatically declared him as the first president of the Albanian Muslim Community after communism (Luli & Dizdari, 1997, p. 637).

After that, Hafiz Sabri Koçi's work began to focus more on rebuilding and reconstructing the religious structures in the country. Alongside the many difficulties that he faced during this period, the country also importantly needs to be mentioned to have been going through a transitional period, and implementing a recovery plan was also economically very difficult. Because almost all the mosques and religious centers in the country had been demolished and the state had no economic power to rebuild them, people would need to create and contribute to many charity campaigns in order to help.

At the same time, a serious lack of religious teachers and imams was found, as most of them had been killed. Thus, another priority of the Albanian

Muslim Community was to open an Imam Hatip school where religion education would be taught alongside all the other courses.

Hence after a couple of meetings, the first Imam Hatip school was opened on December 12, 1991. Lacking academic staff and resources, the school received support from the former teachers of the Tirana madrasah as well as teachers from Kosovo, Macedonia, and Egypt in order to sustain the school (Muslim Community of Albania, 2012, p. 206). The main goal of this structure was to educate students to embrace the unity of the country while also meeting the spiritual needs of society. The damage caused by the communist regime had been enormous, and its compensation required very intensive and hard work. Subsequently, Imam Hatip schools were opened in Tirana, Durres, Kavaje, Kukes, Peshkopi, Berat, Elbasan, Korçe, and Gjirokaster. The total number of students in all these schools was 1,560, and the number of teachers was 165 (Luli & Dizdari, 1996, p. 100). After 1992, more than 100 students had been sent to Türkiye and more than 56 to Egypt to complete their studies in order to fill the lack of academic staff.

## Other Developments

Another very important thing to highlight was the lack of written resources. Since the communist period, all available resources had been burned by the state. Therefore, the urgent need existed to take certain steps toward creating new resources. Furthermore, after the Albanian Muslim Community had sent the necessary official petitions, the first religious newspaper *Drita Islame* was published in the post-communist period in Albania on January 10, 1992 (Muslim Community of Albania, 2012, p. 206).

In the following years, other newspapers and books with religious content such as *Forty Hadith*, *Ilmihal*, and *History of Islam* were published (Velija, 2017). Because the country had obtained the freedom to publish, their general struggles had lessened. As a result of this, the institutions abroad also were gradually contacted by the President of the Albanian Muslim Community, Hafiz Sabri Koçi, who would go on to participate in the congresses of Islamic Countries and provide aid to ensure the reactivation of religious structures. Regarding this, Sabri had a meeting with the King of Saudi Arabia on April 18, 1991, after which he went to make his first pilgrimage to Mecca with 165 individuals as the first Albanian group of people to have visited the Holy Land in 50 years (Luli & Dizdari, 1996, p. 115). As a result of the visit, 1



million Albanians and 250,000 Arabic Qurans were presented as a gift. Later thousands of Qurans and book donations were received from other Muslim countries (Luli & Dizdari, 1996, p. 176).

This period also witnessed the opening ceremonies of the mosques in the cities of Tirana, Shkodra, Durres, Peqin, Elbaŝan, Korca, Pogradeci, Lushnja, and Shijak as well as the construction of new mosques in the surrounding villages in the same year. The total number of Holy Qurans received reached over half a million. Books and Quran donations were also received from Al-Azhar University. In addition to these, financial aid was also given from many Muslim communities throughout Germany, Macedonia, Belgium, Croatia, Russia, Italy, United States, Sudan, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Egypt, Libya, and Trkiye, and this money was distributed to people in need.

Another goal that was hoped to be accomplished was the opening of mosques and centers in other cities. Thus, by 1993, the opening of the Fush-Çele mosque in Shkoder had been followed by the opening of the Islamic cultural center in Tirana, along with the opening of mosques in Elbasan, Kavaje, Rrogozhine, and other cities. Likewise, the Mufti offices of the cities were restructured, and some basic needs were able to be met.

In addition, the Muslim Community of Albania attempted to reclaim its properties and lands that had been seized by the state during the communist period. Under the presidency of Hafiz Sabri Koçi, the Albanian Muslim Community greatly expanded its goals; by 1995, more than 400 new mosques had been built, 10 Imam Hatip schools had been opened, the number of staff in these schools had reached 100, and the number of students had reached over 1,500 (Drita Islame, 1995).

However, hundreds of students were sent abroad for education, and the number of staff needed to increase. After a serious and intensive process, much progress was made in the country.

## **Hafiz Sabri Koçi and His Thoughts**

The most important thing that an influential person can leave behind are their thoughts combined with their work and struggles. Considering Sabri's role within this context, he can convincingly be said to have lived as a dynamic religious figure as well as an intellectual one, as his work had been

conducted in different fields. He can also be said to have not only been a leader and pioneer of human rights in the country but to have also been a hard-working activist and a great example of a citizen dealing with the struggles of trying to better society.

Nurtured by tradition, but also open to new ideas and innovations, Sabri had gone through a strict madrasah-style basic Islamic sciences education. He also studied philosophy and Sufism at the same time. This inclined him to complete his education in the best and most balanced way possible. These educational moves can be considered as the stepping-stones toward building up his intellectual capacity, which is reflected in all his works and activities. His insistence on ensuring the inclusion of women in religious education within a social structure that did not welcome women can be considered as a determining attitude revealing his position as an inclusive and society-based religious leader.

Moreover, his focus on the meanings of the prayers and his work in this regard are somethings to highlight as strong values of Hafiz Sabri Koçi. Trying to make Islamic thought easily accessible for everyone is only successful when done by a person with both academic and intellectual maturity. Also, when relating to the hegemon political context, his efforts can be considered as a preventive measure that had been taken alongside all the political processes of the country. As a matter of fact, a war had almost occurred against all religions in the following years; in particular, everything that was considered non-national and foreign was doomed to be destroyed. In this context, translating Arabic prayers into the Albanian language can be considered as more of a political than a practical step.

As can be understood from his life and services, his main purpose was to keep Islam alive in both people's hearts and minds and to also carry Islam forward as a value that makes people better citizens. This understanding adds up when investigating the lives of Hafiz Sabri's teachers. They were not only good people and believers but also continued despite their struggles in a way that would benefit society by actively participating in different areas of both social and political life. Both the religious and social thinking structure of Sabri portrayed similarities with his teachers, and like them, he was always present in society beyond his position as an imam. He was a very educated man with a strong intellect, a hard-working person, a very good imam, a good teacher, and overall a very complete person. He carried out his role in society beyond



being just a religious official. One example of this was that he not only worked as an imam but also focused on training youths among his services before his imprisonment, and he had constantly strived toward this goal.

Another part of his service was his duty as the head of the Muslim Community of Albania. Because the country had already been suffering from material and moral destruction, the lack of mosques, centers, books, and almost every other kind of resource had been a serious challenge for the community. By mobilizing other countries, Sabri had managed to fill in many of the gaps in a very short period as well as rebuild many of the mosques and centers. By giving priority to these areas and knowing how to reorganize the needed structures, Sabri has shown that he was not only a one-sided scholar but also a leader with a broad vision.

In this context, another important issue is the purpose and effect Sabri's services had had in terms of protecting the country's integrity. His approach toward the leaders of the other religious communities in the country is the best example of this. Having close relations with the Christians and Orthodox religious leaders who had shared the same fate during his imprisonment and establishing positive relations with them ensured that they would constantly support each other and that mutual respect would continue between the communities. Hafiz Sabri had undergone an intense struggle for the survival of religious structures in the country, and while he had tried to protect the religious integrity of the country on one hand, on the other he had paved the way for Albanian society because of the importance he gave to protecting such social balances that would become a symbol of the coexistence of different religions in terms of both peace and tolerance. His forward-looking attitudes, decisions, and behaviors on this issue have always achieved great results.

Sabri's insistence on preserving the integrity of society also had emerged from the attitude Muslims had toward the distinctions among Sunni, Bektashi, and other sects. His attitude was focused on gathering all these groups and bringing them together without any form of discrimination. While the Sunni-Bektashi distinction had been very clear before, during Sabri's time working, this line of thought had been challenged, and both communities would start becoming more accepting of each other.

The places where he worked along with his services were highly valued by the people. Likewise, his talent in rhetoric, friendliness, good temperament,

love and care for people, and affirmation in religion was a clear reflection of all his religious, educational, and intellectual values. As a result of this, he was always respected and loved by people.

His reaction to the communist regime and his imprisonment are other points that should not be underestimated. His revolutionary standing and balance with his devotion to God's will are great examples of a firm stance. He always advocated that people should fight for their freedom and claim it. Having a very high status as a religious leader made this significantly more important, as he would become an inspiration for many people going through almost the same processes due to having the same ideology.

When talking about the church-state relationship, Hafiz Sabri is seen to have a view on behalf of religious pluralism and religious liberty. According to him, the state should adopt an equal approach to all religions existing in society. Therefore, the state should protect all religious freedom.

With the administrative change made by the beginning of the 1990s, this right had been adopted by the state policies, and the strong line of overriding religions had already been removed. In this regard, Hafiz Sabri Koçi and his work were accepted and protected not only by society but also by the state. The participation of the current Prime Minister of the period in official religious ceremonies is a result of this compromise. Thus, Sabri's constructive attitude and standing in this regard can be considered as some of the most important steps he had taken within the process of rebuilding religious structures in the country. Thanks to his efforts, the wreckages left by the communist era were removed, and huge signs of progress were made towards social improvement and development.

## **Hafiz Sabri Koçi's Death**

Hafiz Sabri Koçi passed away at the age of 83 on June 18, 2004, leaving a great legacy behind him.

In an interview with Sabri's grandson Knaqsim Koçi, he said, "The death of my grandfather was a huge loss not only for our family but also for the whole country. As a person who has always been an example of hard-working and piety, a source of inspiration and a timeless character, he has managed to leave great marks in our memories" (Velija, 2018)



The Archbishop of the Albanian Orthodox Church, Anastas Janullatus, expressed his regret by saying, "I have lost a friend" (Bardhi, 2004).

Sabri's death upset not only the Muslim community but also the people and leaders of other religions. The funeral was held in Et'hem Bey Mosque in Tirana with the attendance of thousands of people. The Albanian people considered this as the last exchange with their spiritual leader and were deeply saddened by this loss.

## Conclusion

With a thorough analysis of the communist period in Albania, one can claim that the implementation and outcome during this period had been entirely negative. One may also go so far as to say that the restrictions and destruction of religious institutions had led the nation into its darkest period. However, such oppression also paved the way for numerous individuals to stand against the regime in the name of freedom and resistance.

As discussed in this paper, Koçi is considered one of the most important and influential figures to have led the nation during the post-communist period. Only through his determination, organization, and kindness (despite the state's ongoing oppression) was he able when the time came to gather a following and take a central role in leadership. As such, Koçi's reputation remains as nothing less than a hard-working religious rights activist who'd influenced the social structure, constitution, and society within Albania. His focus on education, religious communities, women's right to education, and preservation of national values, as well as his dedication to ensuring an education system remain present in the state's employees, as these are among the values he had maintained. Similarly, Sabri's public appearance and works increased greatly after his release from prison. His impact on the Muslim community was profound in that he had developed and organized the building of the first mosque in Albania. Following this, Islamic education began to take place, religious centers had reopened, religious books were being published, and international networks had developed (including establishing a network for those who wished to participate in the holy pilgrimage to Mecca).

As such, Sabri's actions during this period clearly displayed not only the likes of a religious leader but also of a national leader in his abilities to

reorganize the structures that were required in a short span of time. He gave Albania a new broad vision for itself, based on which the country may continue to grow and thrive through its religious and cultural potential. Additionally, the constructive relationship he had built with the church and state grew into one where the state was able to protect religious institutions and their participants alike. As discussed in this paper, this led to significant political and administrative changes within the constitution, and thus also were passed into the nation's culture. Only through his leadership were these terms able to be created, thus allowing the Albanian people to once again look forward to a culturally and religiously unified melting pot, in spite of the damage the regime had left.

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