

Balkan Insight

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Blood Feuds Still Blight Albanian Lives, Report Says

Although the phenomenon has declined in recent years, blood feuds continue to deprive families of basic human rights, a report by Albania's Ombudsman underlines.

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In this Friday, Jan. 18, 2013 photo, Marsela, 9, plays with her doll at her home in northwestern Albania. She is the child of a blood feud family. In 1995, long before she was born, her father killed a friend in a drunken rage - sparking a series of retaliatory killings that have left five people dead so far. Under a centuries-old Albanian code of conduct known as the Kanun that regulates many aspects of life, killings must be avenged with blood. Grieving relatives are duty-bound to target the culprit and the culprit's family. (AP Photo/Hektor Pustina)

“People involved in blood feuds not only lose their loved ones, but in a vicious cycle, dozens of relatives live in fear and insecurity,” the report said.

“This lives of these people are not protected by the law, but rather by self-seclusion, which and undermines their constitutional and human rights,” the report added.

Vendettas based on the medieval code of Lek Dukagjini were outlawed in Albania for nearly half-a-century under the rule of the Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha.

But, following the breakdown of law and order in the early 1990s, after the Communist system collapsed, traditional ways of resolving conflicts resurfaced.

The scale of the problem is hard to monitor as there are deep discrepancies in statistics on blood feuds and related killings. Local media and non-governmental organizations refer to dozens of blood-feud killings per year and to hundreds of children living in isolation as a consequence.

On the other hand, government statistics claim that such killings fell sharply in number over the last decade.

According to the Ombudsman's report, there were 98 murders due to vendettas from 2001 to 2012, including five in the first nine months of the last year.

“Murders due to blood feuds account for 34.4 per cent of the murders that have occurred in Albania in the past two decades,” the report notes.

“In most cases the person who committed the murder was pressed by his family to commit the crime,” it added.

From 2001 until 2012, 1,559 families in Albania were involved in blood feuds, while a decade earlier the figure was 8,229 families.

In total, 69 families live currently isolated in their homes, the majority in the northern region of Shkoder. In these families 33 children cannot attend school because of fear of reprisal from the feuding family.

The Canon of Lek Dukagjin, a centuries-old code of conduct covering every aspect of life, still holds more sway in some areas of northern Albania than the criminal code.

It lays out detailed procedures for blood feuds loosely based on the principle of an eye-for-an-eye. When someone is killed, the victim's family may take revenge not just against the killer himself but against all males in his extended clan.

Because of the loose nature of the rules on retribution, it's often hard to work out who precisely is in danger.

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