



Freedom in the World 2015 - Albania

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2015 Scores

Status: Partly Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 3.0

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 3

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 3

OVERVIEW

The European Union (EU) officially designated Albania as a candidate for membership in June 2014, following three successive rejections. EU officials were apparently encouraged by the initial efforts of the new Socialist Party (PS) government, which took office in September 2013, to combat corruption and organized crime. Earlier in June, police had begun a series of large-scale raids on cannabis-producing areas that were long avoided by local law enforcement agencies.

Opposition lawmakers led by the Democratic Party (PD) boycotted the parliament for several months in the second half of the year. The walkout, triggered in part by a scuffle in the legislative chamber in July, ended in late December after European Parliament members mediated between the two sides.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 27 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 8 / 12

The unicameral, 140-member Kuvendi (Assembly) is elected through proportional representation in 12 regional districts of varying size. All members serve four-year terms. The prime minister is designated by the majority party or coalition, and the president – who does not hold executive powers but heads the military and plays an important role in selecting senior judges – is chosen by the parliament for a maximum of two five-year terms. Bujar Nishani, then the interior minister, was chosen as president in 2012.

Preparations for the 2013 parliamentary elections were disrupted by political deadlock in the seven-seat Central Election Commission (CEC), which prevented it from making crucial decisions that required a five-vote majority. Earlier, the CEC failed to decide on seat distribution for the

country's electoral districts, leading the PD-dominated parliamentary majority to intervene and set the allotments using outdated 2009 population figures. Monitors from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) reported a number of other problems but found that the overall campaign was vibrant, competitive, and largely peaceful, despite an election-day shooting incident. In June 2014, the CEC pledged to implement certain OSCE electoral recommendations, including filling three vacancies that had emerged from the 2013 deadlock. However, the three positions remained vacant at the end of the year, worrying some observers ahead of the 2015 elections.

The PS captured 65 seats, the Socialist Movement for Integration took 16, and two smaller PS-allied parties – the Unity for Human Rights Party, which represents ethnic Greeks, and the Christian Democratic Party – each garnered 1 seat. Meanwhile, the PD won 50 seats and its junior partners – the nationalist Justice, Integration, and Unity Party and the Republican Party – took 4 and 3 seats, respectively. Voter turnout was reported at 53.5 percent. PS leader Edi Rama took office as prime minister, and his cabinet was approved by the new parliament in September.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 13 / 16

The two main political parties, the PS and the PD, are sharply polarized and given to personality-driven rivalry. As prime minister from 2005 to 2013, Sali Berisha of the PD worked to consolidate partisan control over state institutions, particularly after violent antigovernment protests in early 2011. However, the Socialists' electoral victory in 2013 restored confidence in the ability of opposition forces to secure a rotation of power through elections.

Ethnic minorities were able to campaign freely in their own languages in 2013, and voters had access to ballot materials in minority languages. The Romany minority and other marginalized groups are reportedly vulnerable to political exploitation and vote-buying schemes.

In July 2014, the parliament passed legislation to reorganize the country's municipalities, reducing the number from 380 to 61, with three drawn along ethnic lines and designated as minority regions. The PD boycotted the vote, and ethnic Greek and Macedonian parties demanded the preservation or creation of additional minority-dominated units. However, the Constitutional Court rejected a legal challenge to the law in December.

C. Functioning of Government: 6 / 12

Corruption is pervasive, and the EU has repeatedly called for rigorous implementation of antigraft measures. Convictions of high-ranking officials and judges for corruption and abuse of power remain rare. Between July and September 2014, nearly 20 central bank employees, including the governor and inspector general, were arrested for alleged negligence that allowed the theft of some \$6.6 million over four years. Also during 2014, the PD repeatedly unearthed the criminal records of PS politicians and appointees in a bid to discredit the government. A PS lawmaker resigned in November over her son's alleged criminal activity, and a deputy environment minister was fired in December for allegedly failing to pay her power bills.

An EU progress report issued in June praised many anticorruption steps taken under the PS government since January, including the enactment of new civil service legislation, the finalization of a national anticorruption strategy, and adoption of amendments to strengthen rules on asset disclosure and conflicts of interest for public officials. A newly appointed inspector for monitoring assets and conflicts of interest pledged aggressive investigations in February; by late October, his agency had filed charges against 16 officials. The EU report emphasized the need for Albania to follow through with prosecutions for corruption, particularly among high-level officials.

The parliament in September adopted a new freedom of information law, replacing a statute passed in 1999. Civil society groups praised the law, which would accelerate the processing of requests and complaints, fine officials who improperly deny requests, and create a commission to monitor and coordinate compliance, among other changes. In October, the parliament passed a law establishing consultation processes for drafting legislation and major policy strategies.

Civil Liberties: 40 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 13 / 16

While the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, the intermingling of powerful business, political, and media interests inhibits the development of independent news outlets; most are seen as biased toward either the PS or the PD. Reporters have little job security and remain subject to lawsuits, intimidation, and occasional physical attacks by those facing media scrutiny. The government does not limit internet access.

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, which is generally upheld in practice. In September 2014, up to 300,000 Muslims and Christians reportedly attended a public mass led by the visiting Pope Francis, who praised the country's religious tolerance. However, amid concerns about an extremist minority, police in March and April arrested nine people, including two imams, for allegedly recruiting Albanian citizens to fight with radical Islamists in Syria.

The government typically does not limit academic freedom, though students and teachers have faced political pressure ahead of elections. Officials in August moved to close or suspend enrollment at over 30 private universities that were accused of selling diplomas.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 9 / 12

Freedoms of association and assembly are generally respected. Demonstrations by opposition parties and civic groups are common, and they have generally been peaceful since 2011. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) function without restrictions but have limited funding and policy influence.

The constitution guarantees workers the rights to organize and bargain collectively, and most have the right to strike. However, effective collective bargaining remains limited, and union members have little protection against discrimination by employers. School staffing decisions are reportedly subject to corruption and arbitrary criteria; an NGO and local media in 2014 reported illegal firings of school principals in Tirana and other districts.

F. Rule of Law: 9 / 16

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but the underfunded courts are subject to political pressure and influence. President Nishani faced disagreement with the parliamentary majority over high-level judicial nominations during 2014. Before the 2013 change in government, he had appointed a number of senior judges who were seen as PD allies. The justice minister retains the power to open or close judicial disciplinary procedures, an arrangement that has drawn criticism from the Council of Europe and the EU. The NGO Res Publica in February 2014 accused judges of failing to use their authority to postpone pretrial payment of legal fees for poor plaintiffs in most cases, effectively denying them access to the justice system. Traditional tribal law and revenge killings remain a problem in parts of the north.

Police reportedly engage in abuse of suspects during arrest and interrogation. Prison inmates suffer from poor living conditions and lack of adequate medical treatment. The PS government has replaced a number of prison officials and police commanders, and disbanded several police

units, to combat corruption and rising crime rates. The opposition criticized a number of the new appointees, and a leaked December 2013 document from the State Intelligence Service – headed by a nominee of the former government – indicated that the agency was investigating appointees for any criminal connections, an activity that allegedly went beyond the agency's mandate.

In January 2014, police arrested alleged members of a gang suspected of multiple contract killings and murder attempts – largely through the use of car bombs – in Albania and Greece. The group's clients reportedly included businessmen and local officials. A similar bombing in August killed a local businessman in Vlora.

Albania is a transshipment point for heroin smugglers and a key site for European cannabis production. In 2014, police counternarcotics raids targeted the village of Lazarat, estimated to have produced marijuana with a street value of \$5.9 billion during 2013 – equivalent to nearly half of Albania's gross domestic product.

Roma face significant discrimination in education, health care, employment, and housing. A 2010 law bars discrimination based on race and several other categories, including sexual orientation and gender identity, and a 2013 reform of the criminal code introduced protections against hate crimes and hate speech based on sexual orientation and gender identity. However, bias against gay and transgender people remains strong in practice.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 9 / 16

Albanians generally enjoy freedom of movement and choice of residence or employment, though criminal activity and practices related to traditional honor codes limit these rights in some areas. Access to higher education is affected by corruption.

A raft of property-restitution cases related to confiscations during the communist era remain unresolved. Illegal construction is a major problem, as is bribery linked to government approval of development projects.

Women are underrepresented in politics and business, though the new cabinet appointed in 2013 included a record six women, including the first female defense minister. While domestic violence is believed to be widespread, the parliament has adopted some measures to combat the problem in recent years. Albania is a source country for trafficking in women and children, and convictions remain rare despite increased government enforcement and victim-aid efforts over the past year. Young women make up about 90 percent of the workers in the important textile and footwear sector, in which child labor is not uncommon and some 40 percent of workers are not registered, according to the International Trade Union Confederation.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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