

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

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Freedom in the World - ↑ Albania (2007)

Population:
3,200,000

Capital:
Tirana

Political Rights Score: 3
Civil Liberties Score: 3
Status: Partly Free

Trend Arrow

Albania received an upward trend arrow due to increased efforts to combat corruption.

Overview

In June 2006, Albania signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), a move generally seen as the first step toward full EU membership. Under international pressure, the government undertook a series of reforms aimed at eradicating corruption and strengthening the rule of law, striving to fulfill the conditions for further integration with Europe.

From World War II until 1990, former dictator Enver Hoxha's xenophobic Communist regime turned Albania into the most isolated country in Europe. The Communist government collapsed in 1990, and in March 1992, multiparty elections brought the Democratic Party (DP), led by Sali Berisha, to power. Continuing poverty and corruption weakened Berisha's government, and in 1997, the collapse of several popular pyramid investment schemes resulted in widespread arms looting and violence.

From 1997 to 2005, Albania was ruled by the Socialist Party (SP), led by Prime Minister Fatos Nano. Albania's first parliamentary elections since 1997 were held over four rounds between June and August 2001. Although international monitoring groups acknowledged "serious flaws" in the election process, the polls were nevertheless deemed valid. Berisha's DP announced a boycott of parliament in protest against electoral irregularities and did not resume participation until January 2002.

However, the truce between Berisha and Nano proved fragile, and by the beginning of 2003, Albania's short-lived national political unity disintegrated. More signs of the continued turmoil within Albanian politics came with the resignation of Foreign Minister (and former prime minister) Ilir Meta, a bitter Nano rival, in July 2003. Disagreements within ruling factions in the government prevented the nomination of a replacement for the rest of the year.

The July 3, 2005, legislative elections, in which more than 20 parties fielded candidates, were considered the most unpredictable since 1991. The two major parties urged their voters to support smaller allies in hopes that those parties would clear the 2.5 percent threshold to enter parliament and thus supplement their own representation. Although the opposition DP won a clear victory, the ruling SP contested the results in many constituencies. The consequence was a

lengthy delay in obtaining final results until September, when Prime Minister Berisha formed a government. The DP ultimately obtained 56 seats, with a further 24 controlled by its allies. Meta formed his own Socialist Movement for Integration, which took seats away from the SP. The SP was perceived to have lost support due to the country's corruption, internal party disputes, and voters' desire for change. While the election was not free from fraud, it was praised for bringing Albania's first change of power without significant violence in the post-Communist era.

The relationship between political parties in the Kuvendi Popullor (People's Assembly) remained highly adversarial throughout 2006, particularly after contentious debates over the makeup of the Central Election Commission and scheduling of local elections. The DP insisted that the elections take place at the end of December 2006 or early January 2007, whereas the opposition claimed that bad weather would have a negative impact on the vote. As of December 31, 2006, the date for local elections was not finalized. Furthermore, several political deadlocks hindered the work of the Parliament.

The ruling coalition, led by the DP, scored a major victory in June 2006 by signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union (EU), a move generally seen as the first step toward full EU membership. The EU continued to pressure the government during the year to accelerate judicial reforms and increase anticorruption efforts. As a result, the government introduced several key reforms, including a new law to improve judges' qualifications and clarify disciplinary proceedings. Moreover, the government sought to minimize corruption by reducing bureaucratic requirements for various permits and licensing and reducing the number of administrative staff.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Albania is an electoral democracy. However, elections held in July 2005 for the 140-seat Kuvendi Popullor (People's Assembly) were judged to have complied only partially with international standards. Observers noted flawed procedures, including multiple voting and violations of secrecy. Although there was one death due to election-related violence, this was minimal compared with previous elections. Single-member districts comprise 100 of the parliamentary seats; the remaining are filled by proportional representation. People's Assembly members are elected for four-year terms. The prime minister is designated by the parties that form a majority coalition. The president holds a largely symbolic post and is chosen by the People's Assembly for a five-year term.

With the involvement of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Albania began reforming its election process before the 2005 elections. Votes are now counted in a limited number of designated locations under the authority of local electoral commissions. Procedures for administrative and judicial review of postelection disputes were improved, and new campaign finance laws were put into place. An agreement between the major parties on the boundaries of electoral zones cleared the way for approval of the new electoral code in January 2005, with a new law related to the zones passed in March. While the OSCE concluded that the reforms did not resolve all potential problems, they did represent a major step forward.

A number of political parties operate throughout the country. The two major parties, the DP and the SP, differ more with regard to the personalities of their respective leaders than their political platforms or ideology. While, traditionally,

Prime Minister Berisha's DP found its support in the north of the country and former prime minister Nano's SP in the south, these divisions have been diminishing. The Greek minority is represented mostly through the Union for Human Rights, which has three seats in Parliament. Other minorities are poorly represented and participate minimally in public life.

Although corruption pervades all areas of life in Albania, the government appears to be willing to address the problem. The European Commission reported that the number of public officials prosecuted and sentenced for corruption increased during the first quarter of 2006. Moreover, the government has augmented its efforts to combat corruption in the tax and customs departments—which have traditionally been the most problematic in this respect—and has reduced the bureaucratic procedures necessary to obtain various permits and licenses. Albania was ranked 111 out of 163 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index, which is an improvement over last year's ranking of 126 out of 159 countries surveyed.

While the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, and freedom of the press has improved since the fall of communism, problems remain. The intermingling of powerful business, political, and media interests inhibits the development of independent and objective media, and suits against journalists for legitimate criticism are common. Moreover, journalists are still subjected to intimidation and attacks, although the identity of the perpetrators is not always clear. In December 2005, a journalist for the daily *Gazeta Shqiptare* was attacked and beaten by two unknown assailants. In a separate incident in December, unidentified persons threw explosives near a building that houses three newspapers. Investigations into both of these cases were pending at year's end. The government does not limit internet access. As of December 2005, only 2.4 percent of the population had accessed the internet, due largely to widespread poverty and poor infrastructure in rural areas.

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and religious practice, and Albania has not seen the inter-religious turmoil typical of its neighbors. The government does not require registration of religious groups and has been reasonably accommodating in recognizing religious minorities. Jehovah's Witnesses, who were subjected to negative media coverage in previous years, received government cooperation and assistance in efforts to suppress their negative image.

The government generally does not limit academic freedom, although it has interfered in appointments at educational institutions. Corruption is rife throughout the university system, with bribes often needed to matriculate and pass exams. Prior to leaving office, the Nanos government ended the requirement that high school students pass an admission exam in order to enter universities, though the Berisha government reversed the decision because the universities lacked the capacity to accommodate all new admissions .

Freedom of association is generally respected, although police have been known to use excessive force against protesters. Independent nongovernmental organizations are active, and their impact on the government is slowly growing. The constitution guarantees the rights to organize and bargain collectively, and with the exception of military personnel, civil servants, and the police, all workers have the right to strike. However, effective collective bargaining remains limited, and union contracts are often difficult to enforce. The constitution provides for an

independent judiciary, but the structure of the judicial system leaves room for government pressure. Both the judiciary and law enforcement agencies are inefficient and prone to corruption, and judicial proceedings can be unduly long and unjustifiably delayed. Enforcement of judicial decisions is weak, especially when rulings are against government interests. The government has undertaken measures to combat corruption, develop judicial infrastructure, and institute a case-management system, though problems remain. In 2006, the Council of Ministers approved a new law that aims to improve the quality of judges, randomize the assignment of cases, and clarify disciplinary actions against judges. Moreover, judicial transparency has increased as more judicial decisions have been made available to the public. Despite these reforms, an October 2006 OSCE report on the state of the criminal justice system in Albania concluded that the legal rules were frequently ignored or manipulated to achieve a desirable outcome, and that corruption impeded functioning of the justice system.

Police undergo human rights training and monitoring but often use excessive force and torture. In 2006, the government increased efforts to punish ill-treatment and torture by law enforcement officials. In 2005 and the first quarter of 2006, 40 such cases were initiated, 16 cases were tried in court, and 3 cases resulted in sentencing.

Widespread lawlessness plagues large parts of Albania. Weak state institutions have augmented the power of crime syndicates, and international law enforcement officials claim that Albania has become an increasingly important transshipment point for drug smugglers. The weakness of state institutions in northern Albania has resulted in the resurgence of traditional tribal law in these areas, including blood feuds involving revenge killings among different families and clans.

Although Albania has created a basic framework to protect ethnic minorities, implementation of many measures is incomplete. Albania's 95,000 Roma face significant discrimination and social and political marginalization. According to a 2006 European Commission report, 78 percent of Roma live in poverty and 39 percent in extreme poverty, and the living conditions for Roma worsened in Tirana during the year.

The constitution places no legal restraints on women's role in politics and society, but women are vastly underrepresented in most governmental institutions. Traditional patriarchal social mores pose significant limits on the position of women in society. Many groups, particularly in northern Albania, abide by a medieval moral code according to which women are considered chattel. A gender equality law was adopted in 2004, but the situation for women has improved only slightly. Domestic violence is common and is not a criminal offense. Women who seek redress against domestic abuse are often ignored by the authorities, who lack training regarding how to deal with such issues. Albania is a source country for trafficking in women and children. Roma and Egyptian children are disproportionately affected, and internal trafficking is increasing. As the result of a national strategy to combat trafficking, there has been a notable reduction in trafficking across the Adriatic and Ionian seas over the last two years. Moreover, a number of traffickers have been successfully tried and convicted in Albanian courts.