



Freedom in the World - Albania (2011)

Capital: Tirana

Population:
3,196,000

Political Rights Score: 3 *

Civil Liberties Score: 3 *

Status: Partly Free

Overview

The opposition Socialist Party continued its boycott of the parliament through the first five months of 2010 and attempted to obstruct legislative activity thereafter as it pursued its demand for a recount of ballots from the June 2009 parliamentary elections. The standoff threatened to stall Albania's progress toward European Union membership, though a visa-liberalization agreement with the bloc took effect in December. In a positive step, the parliament in February passed an antidiscrimination law that included protections for sexual minorities.

Ruling from World War II until his death in 1985, communist dictator Enver Hoxha turned Albania into the most isolated country in Europe. The regime began to adopt more liberal policies in the late 1980s, and multiparty elections in 1992 brought the Democratic Party (PD), led by Sali Berisha, to power. Continuing poverty and corruption, along with unrest after the collapse of several vast investment scams, resulted in the election of a new government led by the Socialist Party (PS) in 1997.

Former president Berisha returned to government as prime minister after the PD won the 2005 parliamentary elections. While the poll was not free from fraud, it was praised for bringing Albania's first postcommunist rotation of power without significant violence. In 2007, the parliament elected PD candidate Bamir Topi as the country's new president.

Berisha's government was plagued by allegations of corruption and abuse of office in 2008, including a case stemming from a weapons depot explosion that killed 26 people and destroyed hundreds of homes that March. Nevertheless, the PD secured a narrow victory in the June 2009 parliamentary elections. The ruling party took 68 seats in the 140-seat parliament and eventually formed a coalition government with four smaller parties that collectively held seven seats. The PS, in opposition with 65 seats, boycotted the new parliament when it convened in September, and mounted a series of street protests to demand a fraud investigation and a partial ballot recount. Berisha countered that the courts had approved the results and the PS had exhausted its legal appeals.

The standoff continued throughout 2010 despite a series of mediation efforts by the president and European representatives. The PS finally named a deputy parliament speaker and committee members in June, but it continued to mount protests and block legislative votes that required a three-fifths majority. The deadlock threatened various reform efforts linked to Albania's application for European Union (EU) candidacy, and EU officials warned that further progress was needed before candidate status could be granted. Nevertheless, a visa-free travel agreement with the bloc took effect in December.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Albania is an electoral democracy. International observers of the 2009 parliamentary elections hailed improvements in a number of areas, but also cited problems including media bias, abuse of state resources, political pressure on public employees, and flaws in the tabulation process. Under a new electoral code passed in late 2008, the unicameral, 140-member Kuvendi Popullor (People's Assembly) was 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 five-year term.

Despite their sharp, personality-driven rivalry, the two major political parties, the PD and the PS, ran on nearly identical platforms and pledges of EU integration in 2009. They also cooperated in 2008 to pass the new electoral rules, which strongly disadvantaged smaller parties. Minor parties held some 40 seats after the 2005 elections, but fell to just seven seats—split among four parties—in 2009. The Constitutional Court struck down elements of the electoral code in June 2010, making it somewhat easier for nonparliamentary parties to obtain a place on the ballot.

Corruption is pervasive, and the EU has repeatedly called for rigorous implementation of antigraft measures. Prosecutor General Ina Rama continues to pursue high-level cases with support from U.S. and EU officials, but Prime Minister Sali Berisha has refused to dismiss cabinet ministers tainted by indictments, and prosecutions are regularly thwarted by parliamentary immunity and unfavorable court rulings. Economy Minister Dritan Prifti was replaced in September 2010, but the government denied that his removal was related to the opposition's corruption claims against him. Albania was ranked 87 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

While the constitution guarantees freedom of expression, the intermingling of powerful business, political, and media interests inhibits the development of independent outlets. During the 2009 campaign period, most outlets were seen as biased toward either the PS or PD. Reporters have little job security and remain subject to lawsuits, intimidation, and in some cases physical attacks by those facing media scrutiny. Television and newspaper reporter Piro Nase was assaulted in November 2010 by two men who made threats related to his work. In December, a court acquitted oil magnate and Berisha ally Rezart Taci of beating media owner Mero Baze in late 2009, though two of Taci's bodyguards were found guilty and fined. Berisha routinely denigrates the media, and his government has placed financial pressure on critical outlets. In June 2010, a court ordered the television station Top Channel to pay roughly \$500,000 for airing a video and audio recording in March 2009 that showed then culture minister Ylli Pango engaging in apparent sexual harassment of a female job applicant. The court found that the station had obtained the recording illegally. The government does not limit internet access.

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and it is usually upheld in practice. The government generally does not limit academic freedom, although both students and teachers were reportedly pressured to support the PD ahead of the 2009 elections.

Freedoms of association and assembly are generally respected. As part of its political standoff with the government, the PS mounted a number of large demonstrations in the capital during 2010, and they met with little interference. Smaller protests related to unresolved property claims from the communist era have led to confrontations with police. Independent 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 illegal antiunion activity by employers has been reported. Child labor is a problem, particularly in the garment industry.

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but the courts are subject to political pressure. Several vacancies on the Constitutional Court and Supreme Court went unfilled in 2010 due to disagreements between the president, who nominates the judges for confirmation by the parliament, and the PD majority, which demanded more influence over the appointments. The Constitutional Court had ruled against the PD government in a number of recent cases, rejecting a maritime border treaty with Greece as well as a controversial lustration law in early 2010. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court reportedly struggled with a backlog of some 7,000 cases as well as budget and staffing cuts. The judiciary and law enforcement agencies in general are inefficient and prone to corruption, and the implementation of court decisions is weak, especially when they go against government interests.

Police reportedly engage in abuse of suspects during arrest and interrogation, and such ill-treatment is lightly if ever punished despite vigorous criticism from the country's human rights ombudsman. Ermir Dobjani, the ombudsman since 2000, stepped down in February 2010 when his

second term expired; he had not been formally replaced by year's end, though the institution continued to function under an acting leader. Prison inmates continue to suffer from overcrowding and lack of adequate medical treatment.

Weak state institutions have augmented the power of crime syndicates. Albania is known as a transshipment point for heroin smugglers and a key site for cannabis production. Traditional tribal law and revenge killings are practiced in parts of the north.

Roma face significant social and economic marginalization, but other minorities are generally well integrated. In June 2010, an appellate court overturned a six-month jail sentence against an ethnic Greek mayor who had removed local road signs on the grounds that they did not include Greek translations. However, tensions flared in August over the death of an ethnic Greek man who was run down by a car after an argument with Albanian youths; several suspects were quickly arrested.

Homosexuality was decriminalized in 1995, but discrimination in society and by law enforcement officials remains strong. In a positive sign, the parliament in February 2010 passed a law barring discrimination based on several categories, including sexual orientation and gender identity.

Women are underrepresented in most governmental institutions. A new 30 percent quota for party candidate lists helped to raise women's presence in the parliament to 23 seats in 2009, from 10 in 2005, though the quota rules contained a number of loopholes. Domestic violence, which is believed to be widespread, is rarely punished by the authorities. Albania is a source country for trafficking in women and children, with the latter typically exploited as beggars in European countries. The EU reported in 2010 that the government has made an effort to combat the practice, but that more effective prosecutions were needed.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click [here](#) for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*