

Albania Overview

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Environment

Albania is situated in the western Balkans. It is bordered by Greece to the south, Macedonia to the east and the republics of Serbia and Montenegro to the north. To the west, there is a 420 km coastline with the Adriatic Sea. More than three-quarters of Albania is mountainous and about a third is wooded.

Peoples

Main languages: Albanian, Greek, Romani, Aromanian, Macedonian

Main religions: Islam (mainly Sunni) Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Roman Catholicism

Minority groups include Greeks 59,000, Macedonians 4,700 (1989 Census; the 2001 Census had no question concerning ethnicity), Roma, Vlachs/Aromanians, Macedonians, Egyptians, Serbs and Montenegrins.

Three minorities are officially recognized in Albania as national minorities – Greeks, Macedonians and Montenegrins. Roma and Vlachs/Aromanians are recognized as linguistic (sometimes called cultural) minorities. Both linguistic and national minorities are recognized under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) in Albania. Some members of the Roma and Vlach/Aromanian minorities would like to be considered national rather than linguistic minorities. Egyptians are not recognized as either a national or a linguistic minority – although they would like their status to be acknowledged as such.

There is an urgent need for reliable figures on ethnic and religious minorities in Albania. Some of the figures which are quoted date back to the 1930s. This issue has been raised by both the Council of Europe and the European Commission on Racism and Intolerance (ECRI).

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History

The Albanians are most probably the descendants of the ancient Illyrians who were colonized after the seventh century BCE by the Greeks and subsequently by the Romans. During the Middle Ages, modern-

day Albania formed successively parts of the Byzantine, Bulgarian, Serbian and Angevin-Norman empires. The Albanian lands lay at the meeting point of Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Following the schism between the two churches, the northern population generally adhered to Roman Catholicism and the southern to Eastern Orthodoxy. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Albanian lands were overrun by the Ottoman Turks. Most Albanians subsequently embraced Islam.

Under circumstances which are disputed, the Albanians spread eastwards into Kosovo, western Macedonia and Greece. The Albanian national movement which developed in the late nineteenth century sought to unite Albanians in a single state. The independent Albania established on the eve of the First World War did not, however, include Kosovo and western Macedonia, which then had a combined population of about 800,000 Albanians. Aspirations for a state which united the Albanian people were briefly realized under the aegis of the Italians and Germans during the Second World War. After 1945, however, Albania returned to its former borders. It is presently estimated that two-thirds as many Albanians live in neighbouring states as in Albania itself.

In 1944, the communists led by Enver Hoxha imposed a strict Stalinist regime on Albania. In 1967, Albania was proclaimed 'the first atheist state' and all religious practices were banned. Churches and mosques were demolished or converted to secular use and in the mid-1970s personal names of a Christian religious character were prohibited. Hoxha died in 1985 and a moderate reform programme was introduced which accelerated with the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989.

In 1990, the ban on religious practice was lifted and the establishment of political parties was permitted. Multi-party elections held in March 1991 resulted in a victory for the communists, who subsequently renamed themselves the Socialist Party of Albania. New elections held in spring 1992 led to the formation of a coalition government headed by the opposition Democratic Party. In 1996 the Democratic Party recorded a landslide victory in a general election which was widely reported as unfair. In spring 1997 Albania descended into anarchy following the collapse of widespread pyramid saving schemes and the country remained unstable for some years until the early 2000s.

Minorities and history

Many of the issues facing Albania's minorities today are related to historical identity. For example, there has been a significant Bektashi community in Albania. The Bektashis follow a version of Islam akin to Sufism. In Albania, Bektashis want to be recognized as a separate branch of Islam – but the Sunni state representatives insist they are simply a sect. Thus, while they may practise their religion, they are not afforded special treatment as a separate religious minority.

The substantial Egyptian community (sometimes known as Jevgs) see themselves as distinct from the Roma community. According to some narratives, the Egyptians were descendants of Coptic migrants who came from Egypt in the fourth century. Other accounts say they are descended from Egyptian slaves who arrived in Albania in the nineteenth century. Whatever their true origins, the authorities do not recognize them as a separate minority in Albania, as to qualify for minority status under Albanian law, a group of individuals must meet certain criteria. They must share the same language (other than Albanian), have documentation to prove its distinct ethnic origin or national identity, and have distinct customs and traditions or a link to a kinship state outside of the country. The government maintains that the Egyptians did not meet some criteria, such as a distinct language and traditions, and instead considered them a community – rather than a distinct minority.

Albania has always had a minority of Jews, the number of which was augmented in the sixteenth century by an influx of Sephardic Jews from Spain. A steady decline in the Jewish population may be detected

over the course of the twentieth century. In 1990–91, the remnants of the Jewish minority, numbering about 300 people, migrated en masse to Israel at the invitation of the Israeli government.

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Governance

In 2006, Albania signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU. Theoretically, this is the first step towards membership of the EU. For the country, it crowned 16 years of – sometimes rocky – transition to democracy. Under this agreement, Albania is obliged to improve its treatment of ethnic minorities – in order to bring it into line with EU-wide standards.

Prior to this, the country had already undertaken some important reforms. In 1993, a charter of rights passed by the Albanian legislature assures ‘individuals belonging to minorities’ full protection and equality before the law and makes provision for education in the mother tongue. In addition, the Albanian Constitution guarantees the rights of recognized national minorities, including the right to study and be taught in their mother tongue. Correspondingly, there is some provision of schools and classes for the Greek and Macedonian national minorities, where education in minority language is available, to varying degrees. However, other minorities do not fare so well. There is a lack of education in and of minority languages for the Aromanian/Vlach and the Roma minorities.

The Greek minority participates politically through a number of national parties. For example, the Human Rights Union Party theoretically represents all Albania’s minorities but in practice predominantly the Greek minority. In the 2001 elections it received 2.6 per cent of the vote and three members of parliament. At the last elections in July 2005 it won two seats in parliament. Other minorities, in particular Roma and Egyptians, appear to be outside the system. The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, in its third report on Albania in December 2004, expressed its concern over the lack of effective participation of persons belonging to some minority groups in the country’s decision-making processes at the national as well as local levels. It said that a lack of statistical information made it impossible to assess the extent of the problem, but highlighted the marginalization of the Roma and the Egyptians in particular, saying that ‘numbers of Egyptians and Roma in state institutions seem particularly low, with those few persons that are employed in the public sector for the most part filling functions such as cleaning and maintenance’.

In the July 2005 elections there were no Roma candidates for mayor for a single municipality or commune, although the main parties did include some Roma candidates in their lists for the local councils.

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Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

Much still remains to be done to improve the lives of Albania’s minorities. This was reflected in the Council of Europe’s Committee of Ministers’ 11 May 2005 resolution on the implementation of the FCNM. It stated: ‘Further efforts are required to complete the legal and administrative framework and to ensure its full realisation in practice, including in relation to the use of minority languages in relations with administrative authorities and the display of traditional local names, street names and other topographical indications.’

One fundamental problem remains the lack of reliable data on minority communities, and this is proving

to be a source of tension between the state and minorities. For example, Macedonian organizations boycotted the 2001 Census because there was no option for Macedonians on the census list. The Council of Europe has recommended that Albania conduct a new census. Furthermore, in its second report on Albania, the European Commission on Racism and Intolerance strongly urged the Albanian authorities to include a question about ethnic identity in the general census, respecting the principle of voluntary self-identification. The Commission also noted that different minority groups claimed their numbers are significantly underestimated by the Albanian authorities.

[Roma](#) and [Egyptians](#) continue to face discrimination and extreme poverty. At a 2003 seminar held by MRG in Tirana, there were examples given of blatant racism. For example, one female patient was separated from others in the hospital because she was Roma. [Greeks](#) continue to complain about political marginalization.

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