

Human Rights Watch

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Human Rights Watch World Report 1998

ALBANIA

Human Rights Developments

1997 was a tumultuous and tragic year for Albania, in which approximately 2,000 people lost their lives during a popular revolt, the government's violent response, and the chaos that ensued. As discontent with the government spread, the state arrested and beat demonstrators, muzzled the press, and ordered the secret police and army to quell the uprising through all means. The ruling Democratic Party (DP) armed its supporters to defend the embattled president Sali Berisha, who ultimately lost power in an election monitored by the international community.

The spark for the mass protests was the collapse of criminally linked high-risk investment schemes in November and December 1996, in which large sections of the population lost their life savings. Many believed that Berisha's government was tolerating, if not directly involved in, these schemes. However, underlying the protests was dissatisfaction with Berisha's increasing authoritarianism and the fact that, by the end of 1996, Albania had become a one-party state based on fear and corruption. The DP controlled the executive, judiciary, and legislative branches of government, as well as the police, security service (SHIK), and electronic media.

In January 1997, the government responded to the growing protests with repression and force. Demonstrations were banned and the police beat and detained hundreds of protestors, especially in the south where the dissatisfaction with Berisha was most intense. On television, Berisha accused the protesters of being "red bandits" working in collaboration with "Albania's traditional enemies." The secret police harassed key opposition politicians, journalists, and government critics, whom the state-run media were blaming for inciting the crisis. At least eight people were physically attacked by unknown assailants believed to be the secret police during January and February, including the independent writer Edi Rama (January 22) and Socialist Party activist Ndre Legisi (January 27), both of whom were seriously injured. In all cases, the police failed to conduct an adequate investigation.

The government undertook increasingly repressive measures in January and February as the demonstrations grew more violent, and angry mobs ransacked the DP headquarters and municipal buildings in towns across the south. From January 26-30, the police and SHIK made wide-scale arrests in the southern towns of Lushnje, Berat, and Kora. Many people were taken from their homes in the middle of the night without an arrest warrant and held for three to four days in unspecified locations. Upon their release, many reported physical abuse and torture.

Journalists also came under increasing attack, especially Albanians working with foreign news agencies. Correspondents with Reuters, Associated Press, and the BBC were followed and received threatening phone calls from unidentified persons believed to work for the state. Some of them were detained by the police or had their equipment and notebooks confiscated during demonstrations. A number of them fled the country out of fear for their lives.

Violent protest erupted into open fighting with the SHIK in the southern city of Vlora on February 27, one day after approximately one hundred secret police forces were sent south from Tirana. The violence quickly spread to other cities in the south, where insurgents overran police stations and army bases, arming themselves with automatic weapons, grenades and anti-aircraft guns.

Berisha mobilized the army, and parliament declared a state of emergency on March 2, which included a shoot-to-kill policy on armed insurgents and a curfew. The emergency legislation also placed restrictions on public gatherings and required that newspapers be cleared by a government censor. Article 3 of the emergency law stated that investigations would begin immediately against those who had "organized or instigated the revolt," which allowed the government to intimidate those who had peacefully expressed their opposition to the government and had not been involved in the violence. The day the state of emergency went into effect, a rubber-stamp parliament re-elected Berisha to another five-year term as president.

That night the office of the largest opposition newspaper, *Koha Jone*, was destroyed by arsonists believed to be members of the secret police. On three occasions during the night, groups of armed men fired automatic rifles at the paper's office and, during their last visit, set the building on fire. The police never conducted an investigation. That night, two *Koha Jone* employees were detained by plainclothes policemen in Tirana; Alfred Peza, a journalist, was detained in the police station in Fier on March 4. All three were held for one day and beaten.

Meanwhile, DP "volunteers" were armed by the party with assistance from the secret police. Local DP branches handed out weapons to their supporters throughout the country, especially in Tirana and the north. These armed civilians, together with SHIK, comprised Berisha's defense in the capital.

On March 6, after an E.U. and OSCE delegation visited Tirana, Berisha withdrew the armed forces from the south, leaving the population free to commandeer army, navy, and air force bases across the region. By this time, many of the young conscripts had already defected, and large sections of the population, including children, became heavily armed. Prisoners broke free from the state's prisons; criminals and armed gangs took advantage of the chaos to loot businesses and terrorize the local population. There were many reports of rapes and murders.

Increasingly isolated in Tirana and under pressure from the international community, on March 9 Berisha agreed to form a Government of National Reconciliation with representatives from all the Albanian political parties, although the DP maintained control of the all-important Ministry of the Interior. The transitional government, headed by a Socialist, was mandated to restore order and prepare the country for new parliamentary elections that were scheduled for June 28. But Berisha maintained control of the secret police and broadcast media.

Outside the capital, "salvation committees" were formed. In some places they were local attempts to restore order; in other places they were run by gangsters intent on profiting from the chaos and Albania's lucrative trade in cigarettes, arms, drugs, and the trafficking of women. The DP claimed that some of these committees were supporting the Socialist Party.

On March 28, the U.N. Security Council authorized an eight-country military force, led by Italy, to secure the delivery of humanitarian aid, even though humanitarian organizations said that such protection was not required. Most observers believed the unspoken reason for the intervention was to stem the flow of Albanian refugees to Italy and other neighboring countries.

The elections on June 28 were monitored by the OSCE with assistance from the multi-national military force, which escorted foreign observers. Despite anarchic conditions that created obstacles to the electoral process, such as the Democratic Party's inability to campaign in the south and Berisha's strict control of the state media, the elections proceeded in a surprisingly fair manner. The international community deemed them "adequate and acceptable."

The Socialist Party (former Communists) won more than two thirds of the seats in the new parliament, compared to 25 percent for the Democratic Party. Six other parties also won seats in the 140-seat assembly. After some delay, Berisha resigned, and Fatos Nano, who had been imprisoned by Berisha for four years following an unfair trial in 1993, was elected prime minister. A five-party coalition government was formed, and a physicist, Rexhep Mejdani, was chosen president.

At the end of 1997, it was still too early to evaluate the new government's human rights record. Nano had condemned political revenge and promised to return Albania to a state governed by the rule of law. Some signs were promising: in September a repressive press law, enacted by Berisha in 1993, was abrogated, and the state television, radio, and press agency (ATA) became more open to a diversity of political views, although they were still subject to political pressures. The government was attempting to collect arms from the population, and a commission to draft a constitution had been formed.

However, the now-opposition Democratic Party, headed by Berisha, was complaining of politically motivated purges of state employees. DP deputies staged hunger strikes to protest what they viewed as biased coverage in the state television and radio against the DP. On September 20, a well-known DP deputy, Azem Hajdari, was shot by a Socialist deputy inside the parliament building. Hajdari claimed it was a political attack, but evidence suggests that it was an individual act of revenge. The government condemned the attack, arrested the attacker, and charged him with attempted murder.

The Right to Monitor

The general atmosphere of fear during the 1996-97 crisis restricted the work of domestic human rights organizations, but there were no direct attempts by the government to hinder their work. Before and during the crisis, however, critical human rights groups came under constant attack in the state-run media for being "communists" or "enemies of the state." The June 28 elections were monitored freely by local and foreign organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental.

Since the elections, Human Rights Watch/Helsinki is not aware of any government attempts to restrict local or international human rights groups. However, on June 30, a Human Rights Watch/Helsinki representative was struck once during a press conference of the Democratic Party by an unidentified person believed to be a supporter of the DP. In early July, a member of the British Helsinki Human Rights Group, an organization that has supported Berisha and the DP, was reportedly shot at by an unknown assailant as he sat in a cafe with Tritan Shehu, the former foreign minister and DP secretary general.

The Role of the International Community

Europe

The international community bears some responsibility for the crisis in Albania. Eager for an ally in the region during the war in Bosnia, the United States and West European governments, especially Italy, provided high levels of political and economic support to Berisha's government from 1991-96 despite the human rights abuses and corruption that were taking place. The European Union provided more aid per capita to Albania (U.S. \$560 million since 1990) than to any other East European country, even though the E.U.'s Trade and Cooperation Agreement with Albania was conditioned on "respect for democratic principles and human rights." The Council of Europe, especially the head of the Parliamentary Assembly, Leni Fischer, failed to criticize the government- and even praised Berisha-despite the ongoing violations. Such unqualified support, without regard for the Albanian government's human rights record, helped Berisha dismantle all viable political forces in the country, some of which were more moderate and democratic minded.

The European community reversed its one-sided position once the crisis began to have international ramifications. An OSCE mission, headed by former Austrian Chancellor Franz Vranitzky, was instrumental in brokering the creation of the reconciliation government and organizing the June elections. The multi-national military force escorted foreign election monitors during the elections and helped stabilize the country. However, on March 28, approximately eighty Albanians drowned in the Straits of Otranto when an Italian military ship collided with an Albanian ferry packed with refugees heading to Italy. At year's end, the circumstances of the accident remained unclear.

After the elections, the European community pledged its support for the new government, as long as it undertakes the necessary economic and political reform, such as cleaning up the pyramid schemes and initiating legal reform. At a donors' conference in Brussels, the international community, including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, pledged U.S. \$600 million in support without articulating clear human rights conditions.

United States

From 1991-1996, the United States was one of Berisha's most fervent supporters; it provided Albania with U.S. \$236 million in aid, making the U.S. the second largest bilateral donor (following Italy). In return, Berisha opened Albania's ports and airstrips for NATO use and allowed C.I.A. spy planes to be based in the country. Despite this, the U.S. was the first country publicly to express dissatisfaction with Berisha's authoritarianism, although it did so long after ample evidence of serious human rights violations had mounted. More than other countries, the U.S. criticized the fraudulent parliamentary elections that took place in May 1996, as well as other human rights violations.

In 1997, the U.S. played a central role in supporting the reconciliation government, facilitating the elections and encouraging Berisha to accept the results. According to the Department of State, future aid will be conditioned on human rights, although no detailed plan was devised. In October, Prime Minister Nano met Secretary of State Albright in Washington.

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