

Albania

Country:

[Albania](#)

Year:

2016

Freedom Status:

Partly Free

Political Rights:

3

Civil Liberties:

3

Aggregate Score:

67

Freedom Rating:

3.0

Overview:

Local elections held in June 2015 were viewed as an important test of democratic institutions in Albania, which had been designated a candidate for European Union (EU) membership in 2014. International observers said the polls were conducted peacefully, but raised concerns about pressure on voters by politicians, problems with election commission operations, and the improper use of government resources by the ruling coalition during campaigning.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 27 / 40 [Key]

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the parliamentary majority—headed by the Democratic Party (PD) at the time—to intervene and set the allotments using outdated 2009 population figures.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 2014, the CEC pledged to implement certain OSCE electoral recommendations, including filling three vacancies that had emerged from the 2013 deadlock. (The seats were filled in time for the 2015 local elections.)

In the 2013 parliamentary elections, the Socialist Party (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 54 percent. PS leader Edi Rama took office as prime minister, backed by the 37-party Alliance for a European Albania (ASHE), which was led by Rama's PS.

Voters selected 61 mayors and 1,595 councilors in local elections held in June 2015. The ruling ASHE coalition won 63 percent of votes for local council races, and 45 mayoral seats. The PD-led opposition coalition, the People's Alliance for Work and Dignity (APPD), won 32 percent of votes in local council races, and 15 of the mayoral seats. Voter turnout was 48 percent, a bit less than for the 2013 parliamentary polls.

The 2015 local elections were viewed by the EU a test of Albania's democratization. Both the EU and the OSCE, which sent a monitoring mission, praised the election and campaigning period as peaceful; the OSCE also noted improved professionalism among mayoral candidates in Tirana. However, both the OSCE and EU raised concerns about the impartiality of electoral authorities, with the OSCE noting problems in CEC processes for candidate registration, some of which it linked to CEC politicization. It also raised concerns about the accuracy of voter rolls. Additionally, the OSCE documented widespread allegations of pressure on voters, especially public sector employees, who, sometimes under threat of losing their jobs, were urged to attend campaign events for members of the ruling coalition. Politicians from the governing coalition used public resources during their electoral campaigns, with some distributing property-legalization certificates.

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 and 2015 restored confidence in the ability of opposition forces to secure a rotation of power through elections.

Ethnic minorities have been able to campaign freely in their own languages in recent elections. While voters had access to ballot materials in minority languages in 2013, ballots for the 2015 local polls were only in the Albanian language. However, election officials provided voter education materials in minority languages. While the members of the Roma minority and other marginalized groups are vulnerable to political exploitation and vote-buying schemes such as the distribution of fuel vouchers and cash, OSCE observers noted in 2015 that minority communities are becoming increasingly aware of their voting power and more politically engaged.

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. The current government has taken some steps to remove the immunity of politicians

who are accused of crimes. Over the last two years, several lawmakers from the ruling coalition have faced criminal charges. Additionally, in 2015 it emerged that a law firm had alleged that parliament speaker and leader of the Socialist Movement for Integration, Ilir Meta, received a bribe from an international debt-collection company. Both Meta and opposition politicians have called for an international investigation of this allegation, underscoring a general lack of trust of Albanian courts.

The law on access to information complies with international legal standards, though it is not well implemented.

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 OSCE media monitoring of the 2015 election campaign observed that all the major media, including public media, favored one of the major political parties. The government does not limit internet access.

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, which is generally upheld in practice. There are no significant restrictions on free and open private discussion, including for online blogs and social media.

The government typically does not limit academic freedom, though students and teachers have faced political pressure ahead of elections. A proposal to raise tuition at public universities in order to increase the pool of government funds set aside for education was criticized by student protesters, who said it would divert public funding to private universities at the expense of poorer students, and erode academic freedom. In response, government officials said the measure would provide for equal treatment of public and private universities.

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. 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.

F. Rule of Law: 9 / 16

The constitution provides for an independent judiciary, but the underfunded courts are subject to political pressure and influence, and public trust in judicial institutions is low. In August 2015, the chairman of the parliamentary commission on the justice sector recommended constitutional changes aimed at revamping the High Court of Justice, which nominates judges prosecutes judges suspected of wrongdoing; the court has generally failed to address corruption in the judicial sector

and is widely considered to be politicized. In September, the government Inspectorate for the Declaration and Audit of Assets and Conflict of Interests accused the chief judge of the Appellate Court of Tirana of corruption after uncovering €1.7 million (\$1.9 million) in suspicious assets.

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 a lack of adequate medical treatment. The PS-led government has replaced a number of prison officials and police commanders, and has disbanded several police units, to combat corruption and rising crime rates.

Albania is a transshipment point for heroin smugglers and a key site for European cannabis production. In August 2015, Albanian police destroyed a number of cannabis plantations in Albania's northern mountains.

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 LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, 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. In the 2015 local elections, all parties met a new gender quota requirement that local council candidate lists be split evenly between male and female candidates. However, just 10 percent of the candidates for mayors were women.

While domestic violence is believed to be widespread, the parliament has adopted some measures to combat the problem in recent years. Convictions for human trafficking remain rare despite increased government enforcement. 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

Full Methodology

