



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice Albania

Albania – ALB36103 – Pogradec –
Democratic Party – Socialist Party –
Political violence – Police – State protection
5 February 2010

1 Please provide information on whether there are reported incidents of Democratic Party supporters being targeted or harmed by socialist supporters in Albania now, particularly in Pogradec province.

Albania's post-1990 democracy has been dominated by the Socialist Party and the Democratic Party. Since the end of the communist dictatorship, these two parties have rotated government and have maintained a confrontational and occasionally violent relationship (the latter mostly conducted by supporters of the two parties). In 1997, widespread electoral fraud and the collapse of giant pyramid schemes resulted in widespread civil conflict, pitting parties against one another. The events led to the deployment of an Italian-led peace keeping force.¹

The relationship between the Socialist Party (SP) and the Democratic Party (DP) remains abrasive; however, incidents of violence between supporters have decreased dramatically. The elections of 2005 were described by Freedom House as the first in post-communist Albania to see a "rotation of power without significant violence." While the 2007 nation-wide local elections were tainted by fraud and consequent "systemic paralysis", according to Freedom House there were no reports of major violence between the supporters of the two major parties.²

The national elections of 2009 did represent a step backwards in terms of party supporter behaviour; however, they did not constitute a reversion to the conduct of the 1990s. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has produced a number of extensive reports on the conduct and results of the 2009 Albanian elections. In an interim report in June 2009 the OSCE states that "[f]or the most part, the campaign environment has remained calm. However, as campaign activities have increased, there has been a corresponding rise in tension in some areas." Conflict and violence did erupt following disputes concerning the placement of campaign materials such as posters. According to the OSCE, one such dispute resulted in death; "[d]isagreements about placement of posters reached a new height on 12 June, when, in the village of Qerret, near Durrës, an SP activist shot and killed a DP activist over a dispute about poster placement. Both parties made statements calling for calm and downplaying the political aspect of the incident."³

¹ Szajkowski, B. (ed) 2005, 'Albania' in *Political Parties Of The World*, John Harper Publishing, London, p.4 – Attachment 1

² Freedom House 2009, *Freedom in the World Country Report Albania*, 16 July – Attachment 2

³ Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe 2009, *Election Observation Mission: Republic of Albania – Parliamentary Elections 2009 Interim Report No 3*, ECOI website, 18 June, p.2

http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1002_1246618860_albania-osce.pdf – Accessed 2 February 2010 – Attachment 3

In November 2009, four months after the disputed elections, supporters of the opposition Socialist Party were still protesting the results in large public demonstrations; however, these protests were largely non-violent. The final election results gave the Democrats 70 seats out of 140, while the opposition Socialists won 66. *Radio Free Europe* reported in November 2009 that the Democrats were ruling with the support of four parliamentarians from the Socialist Integration Movement. The Socialists therefore believe that victory in the disputed seats would have handed them government. *Radio Free Europe* describes protests in Tirana as follows: “Holding banners saying “I want to see my vote” and “Where is my vote?”, supporters of the Socialists, their allies and two centre-right parties marched down Tirana’s main boulevard on November 20 to gather in front of Berisha’s offices...[t]he Socialists pitched tents in the street and handed out coffee and tea to hundreds of supporters determined to spend the night near Berisha’s office.”⁴

Such moderate supporter behaviour is in stark contrast to the 1990s. The 2005 publication *Political Parties of the World* states that following the victory of the Democratic Party in highly disputed elections in May 1996, riots followed in Tirana, “which subsequently exploded into violent rebellion that engulfed the country for several months. The spark that set off the country’s crisis was the collapse of the pyramid schemes in which Albanians had invested an estimated \$1.5 billion.” These elections, however, were “characterized by blatant ballot-rigging, intimidation, and in some instances open violence against opposition candidates and supporters.” According to *Political Parties Of The World*, members of the police and the army did side with the Socialist opposition; however, this may have been due to the fact that many lost their life savings in the pyramid scheme collapses rather than because they allegedly remained traditional supporters of the Socialist Party.⁵

According to *Political Parties of the World*, the south has remained a stronghold of the Socialist party; “Albanian electoral politics has traditionally involved a sharp north-south divide”.⁶ No specific information has been located on relations between the SP and DP supporters in Pogradec.

2 Please provide information as to whether there are reported incidents of police protection being withheld from Democratic Party supporters in Albania now, particularly in Pogradec province.

Despite the participation of members of the police force and army in the events of 1996, there have been no recent reports of police either withholding protection for Democratic Party supporters, or accusations of harm towards party supporters. In 2001 Amnesty International did report that in January of that year “Azgan Haklaj, a local leader of the opposition Democratic Party in the northern district of Tropoja, was arrested at home and subsequently detained for investigation on charges of ‘taking part in illegal demonstrations’ and ‘violence against property’.” However, this arrest followed events in November 2000, during which Democratic Party supporters violently clashed with police in the town of Bajram Curri. It does not appear to be a case of police arbitrarily harassing Democratic Party members. Amnesty

⁴ ‘Albanian opposition protests to demand vote recount’ 2009, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 21 November – Attachment 4

⁵ Szajkowski, B. (ed) 2005, ‘Albania’ in *Political Parties Of The World*, John Harper Publishing, London, p.4 – Attachment 1

⁶ Szajkowski, B. (ed) 2005, ‘Albania’ in *Political Parties Of The World*, John Harper Publishing, London, p.5 – Attachment 1

International does not suggest in its report that the November 2000 violence stemmed from alleged police support of the Socialists.⁷

In 2009 *Balkan Insight* reported that supporters of the Socialist Party clashed with police in the capital Tirana during the election campaign.⁸ However, this does not suggest that the police have switched allegiances to the Democratic Party. A separate article in *Balkan Insight* acknowledges that while in the past the “police in Albania had been used by politicians to deform the electoral process”, the police had won great praise from international institutions for their “successful management of the last two electoral processes.”⁹

The *Balkan Insight* claim of international praise for Albanian police conduct during the 2007 elections is supported by a 2007 Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) report on the conduct of the elections. The report states that “[t]he performance of the Police was professional throughout the whole process and particularly commendable during the vote count... On election day and throughout the counting process, the police forces continued to perform their duties in a professional manner. They were able to maintain order under circumstances that were at times difficult, and their involvement was called upon only when tensions resulted in physical violence. Observers noted the particularly commendable performance of the police during the count in Gjirokastër.”¹⁰

A 2004 Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (IRB) research response on the Albanian Democratic Party quotes a UK Immigration and Nationality Directorate Operational Guidance Note that makes the following statement regarding membership of the party: “Membership ... is unlikely to lead to persecution by the current Government or the police. Arrests that have taken place would be due to law enforcement concerns (several rallies having been illegal) and not as a result of political membership.” The IRB states that this opinion is consistent with those of “interlocutors interviewed by an Immigration Control Officer (ICO) of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) in mid-2002... Most of the ICO’s interlocutors, especially the diplomatic and international observers, were adamant that there is no political persecution in Albania at present.” The IRB also states that a number of NGOs were also largely in agreement.¹¹

Police behaviour in general in Albania has reportedly made considerable progress since the end of the communist regime in 1990. The Council of Europe’s Committee for the Prevention of Torture reported in 2009 that, unlike during a previous visit, “the majority of persons interviewed by the delegation stated that they had been treated correctly whilst in police custody.” Reports of physical ill-treatment do continue; however, the report indicates that such accusations tend to be levelled at the criminal police, suggesting that such actions take place during interviews for criminal investigations rather than sporadic and unlawful action

⁷ Amnesty International 2001, *Concerns in Europe January – June 2001: Albania*, 1 September <http://asiapacific.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGEUR010032001?open&of=ENG-CZE> – Accessed 3 February 2010 – Attachment 5

⁸ ‘Albania Opposition Supporters Clash With Police’ 2009, *Balkan Insight*, 26 June <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/news/20562/> – Accessed 2 February 2010 – Attachment 6

⁹ Likmeta, B. 2009, ‘Albania’s Police Chief Replaced’, *Balkan Insight*, 29 October <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/main/news/23285/> – Accessed 2 February 2010 – Attachment 7

¹⁰ Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe 2007, *Republic of Albania Local Elections 18 February 2007: OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report*, 5 June, p.21 http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2007/06/24859_en.pdf – Accessed 6 October 2009 – Attachment 8

¹¹ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2004, *Issue Paper, Albania: Situation Of The Democratic Party (2002-2003)*, February http://www2.irb-cisr.gc.ca/en/research/publications/index_e.htm?docid=103&cid=14&sec=CH03#2 – Accessed 4 February 2010 – Attachment 9

against party operatives. The report also states that “[t]he most serious allegations were received in respect of the police stations in Korca, Pogradec and Elbasan.”¹² Again, these allegations were related to criminal rather than political matters. The US Department of State remains critical of the Albanian police force, stating in its 2008 Country Report on Human Rights that “[t]he overall performance of law enforcement remained weak. Unprofessional behaviour and corruption remained major impediments to the development of an effective civilian police force.” However, USDOS does add that new recruiting practices may “improve the overall performance of the police.”¹³

One particular event in January 2009 in Tirana might be construed as police cooperation to silence a media outlet critical of the Democratic Government and Prime Minister Sali Berisher. Reporters without Borders reported that on 9 January *Tema*, a privately owned daily critical of the government, suddenly had its long-term lease in a government owned building cancelled. “Police on 9 January 2009 surrounded the offices of the privately-owned daily *Tema* in the capital Tirana and banned access to journalists and other staff”. *Tema* appealed the decision and has since been allowed to remain in its accommodation.¹⁴

In a June 2009 statement to the Commission On Security And Cooperation In Europe Of The United States Congress, Jonas Rollet of the Open Society Institute remarked that in Albania there is a common tendency “of political actors to accuse civic organizations of partisanship”.¹⁵ Rollet is primarily referring to accusations of partisanship by non-government organisations rather than authorities such as the police; however, given such a tendency, it is not unreasonable to suggest that party supporters would similarly accuse police of political bias.

Sources Consulted

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Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada <http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/>

UK Home Office <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/>

US Department of State <http://www.state.gov/>

United Nations (UN)

UN Refugee Agency – Refworld <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/rsd>

Non-Government Organisations

Amnesty International <http://www.amnesty.org/>

International Crisis Group www.icg.org

Freedom House <http://www.freedomhouse.org/>

Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/>

Soros Foundation <http://www.soros.org/about/foundations/albania>

¹² Council of Europe 2009, *Report to the Albanian Government on the visit to Albania carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 16 to 20 June 2008*, 21 January, p.11 – Attachment 10

¹³ US Department of State 2009, *2008 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2008 – Albania*, 25 February – Attachment 11

¹⁴ Reporters without Borders 2009, *Annual Report Albania*, 1 May
http://www.rsf.org/rubrique.php?id_rubrique=797 – Accessed 1 June 2009 – Attachment 12

¹⁵ Rollet, J. 2009, *Briefing On Albania's Elections And The Challenge Of Democratic Transition...*, Soros Foundation, 4 June, p.2
http://www.soros.org/initiatives/washington/events/albania_20090604/albania_20090604.pdf – Accessed 3 February 2010 – Attachment 13

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3. Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe 2009, *Election Observation Mission: Republic of Albania – Parliamentary Elections 2009 Interim Report No 3*, ECOI website, 18 June http://www.ecoi.net/file_upload/1002_1246618860_albania-osce.pdf – Accessed 2 February 2010.
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5. Amnesty International 2001, *Concerns in Europe January – June 2001: Albania*, 1 September <http://asiapacific.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGEUR010032001?open&of=ENG-CZE> – Accessed 3 February 2010.
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