

Foreign Policy In Focus



Volume 2, Number 33
May 1997

Albania

Fred Abrahams, Human Rights Watch

For forty-seven years after World War Two, Albania was an insignificant Balkan country sealed off from the world by mountains, sea, and a devout Stalinist named Enver Hoxha. Having severed ties with both the “imperialist West” and “revisionist East,” the dictatorial president led Albania into near total isolation.

Albania emerged from its long sleep in 1990 when the communist Party of Labor allowed other political parties to form. In March 1992 the opposition Democratic Party (DP) won a majority in parliament, and the DP’s Sali Berisha became the country’s first noncommunist president. Constitutional reform in 1992/3 established Albania as a parliamentary republic based on the rule of law.

Hoxha’s dictatorship left Albania the poorest and most underdeveloped country in Europe. The new government faced the daunting task of rebuilding its economy and

constructing democratic institutions from scratch. At the same time, Albania found itself on the margin of a bloody war in neighboring Yugoslavia.

Albania became strategically important to the NATO powers for two major reasons. One, it offered NATO and the U.S. an important military outpost in the turbulent southern Balkans (in the 1990-96 period Albania opened its ports and airstrips for U.S. military use and housed CIA spy planes for flights over Bosnia). Two, the U.S. and Western Europe feared a southward spread of the Yugoslav conflict to Kosovo (the southwestern part of the former Yugoslavia) and to Macedonia—both of which have large ethnic Albanian populations. The U.S. wanted an Albanian government that would not stoke ethnic unrest among the 2.5 million ethnic Albanians living outside of its borders.

The U.S. played a major role in the DP’s 1992 electoral victory, and it then provided the new government with military, economic, and political support. In the 1991-96 period Washington directly provided Albania \$236 million in economic aid, making the U.S. the second

largest bilateral economic donor (following Italy). In early 1997 the U.S. froze its military aid and training programs. In recent years about two-thirds of U.S. economic aid has been directed to support privatization and to open Albania to U.S. trade and investment through U.S.-government created institutions like the Albanian-American Enterprise Fund. The International Monetary Fund and World Bank promoted programs of privatization and price stabilization and then, together with the U.S., praised Albania as the economic miracle of Eastern Europe, even though much of Albania’s growth was based on sanctions-busting in the former Yugoslavia and illegal trading of arms and drugs.

Although he cast himself as a devout anticommunist who would introduce democratic reform, Berisha resorted to undemocratic practices, such as undermining the judiciary, harassing the independent media, and imprisoning political opponents. Berisha interpreted the silence of the U.S. and other major donors in the face of these human rights violations as a green light to further marginalize his rivals and consolidate power.

This authoritarianism became plainly evident in the parliamentary elections of May 1996 when the ruling party stuffed ballots, intimidated voters, and beat protesters. In January 1997 Albania fell into anarchy following the collapse of several of the get-rich, pyramid schemes in which thousands of Albanians had invested their life savings. Armed insurgents took control of the southern cities, demanding Berisha’s resignation. The police forces and the army disintegrated, and vigilantes armed by Berisha roamed the streets of Tirana.

In March 1997 Berisha agreed to form a national reconciliation government, but he retained the presidency, the interior ministry (which controls the police), and control of the state television. In April 1997 a UN-approved peacekeeping mission organized by Italy went to Albania purportedly to protect humanitarian aid from banditry, even though the agencies delivering the aid claimed they did not need military protection. The Mediterranean nations that supplied the multilateral force had a clear interest in stabilizing the country and halting the outward flow of refugees.

Key Points

- After the cold war, Albania became a country of strategic importance to the United States.
- The U.S. ignored the obvious signs of Berisha’s authoritarianism and corruption.
- Berisha interpreted the silence of the U.S. and other major donors in the face of these human rights violations as a green light to further marginalize his rivals and consolidate power.

The U.S. has too closely tied its foreign policy goals—stability in the Balkans and the construction of free-market democracy in Albania—to one man and one party. Following Berisha's visit to the U.S. in March 1991, Washington began supplying direct assistance to the DP, including donations of computers and cars for the 1992 electoral campaign. William Ryerson, the first U.S. ambassador, stood next to Berisha on the podium at election rallies.

The U.S. failed to criticize, and at times encouraged, the new president as he purged critics of his policies within the judicial system, police, and the DP—often through illegal means. By 1993 DP loyalists and family members held most of the prominent positions in Albania's ministries, institutes, universities, and state media. Citing the threat of communism's return, Berisha successfully instilled fear in the population and discredited his rivals. The U.S. embassy in Albania contributed to the polarization of Albanian politics by refusing to meet most of the opposition parties (former communists as well as others) for the first two years of DP rule. This one-sided view of democratization helped Berisha dismantle most political alternatives, some of which were moderate and truly democratic.

Albania had become a strategic outpost in the region, and the U.S. did not want to jeopardize its new control and political influence in the country. In 1992 Washington deployed a Military Liaison Team to the country and started outfitting the Albanian military with nonlethal equipment, technical expertise, and training. Albania was the first East European state to request NATO membership, and in February 1994 it became a member of the NATO-associated Partnership for Peace. Albania has participated in numerous military training operations with the U.S. and other NATO powers, and the CIA has used Albania as a base for air reconnaissance missions over Bosnia. In January 1995, the U.S. Army finished building a radar station in northern Albania for use by the Albanian military. In addition, Albania opened its land, marine, and airport facilities to NATO operations in the former Yugoslavia.

The State Department also valued Albania for its "responsible and nonprovocative position" with respect to the Albanian-inhabited regions of Kosovo and western Macedonia, which the U.S. considered tinderboxes in the region. In this way, a Faustian deal was made: Berisha pursued moderate policies outside the country in Kosovo and Macedonia, and in return he was free to do what he wanted inside Albania's borders.

Although human rights abuses were mounting, Berisha received a warm welcome in September 1995 when he met with President Clinton and top State, Treasury, and Defense officials. The only public criticism at that time concerned discrimination against Albania's Greek minority—the result of pressure from the powerful Greek lobby in the United States. It was not until late 1995 that the State Department began to express serious concern about the deteriorating democratization

process, highlighted by Berisha's decision to remove the Supreme Court's Chief Justice because of his attempts to establish a politically independent judiciary.

It was not, however, until after the blatantly fraudulent parliamentary elections of May 1996 that the U.S. posture changed decisively. After initial delay, the U.S. criticized the fraud, labeling it "a serious step backward in Albania's democratic development," and calling for new elections. Criticism continued during 1997 as Berisha responded with violence and repression to the popular uprising sparked by the collapse of the pyramid schemes. As part of an effort to isolate Berisha, who steadfastly resisted pressure to resign, the U.S. began talking directly with the caretaker government, which has the mandate to restore order and prepare for new elections. In the midst of the social and political turmoil, Berisha has managed to maintain control over an armed secret police force in Tirana, television and radio, and a slim majority in parliament.

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. But the underlying reason was Berisha's disregard for the rule of law and a persistent pattern of human rights violations by the government. The Berisha administration tolerated the pyramid investment scams and even encouraged people to invest, despite warnings from the international financial institutions. Evidence is beginning to emerge that some of the schemes had direct government ties and were dealing in the illegal trade of oil, arms, and drugs.

In the volatile Balkans, the U.S. is faced with a serious crisis that it helped fuel. The raging anarchy in Albania is both a serious setback for Albania's democratic development and a threat to regional security. In this regard, the disintegration of police and military forces has resulted in the widespread availability of weapons. These are easily purchased or stolen not only by Berisha's opponents but also by criminal gangs and terrorist elements both inside and outside Albania. (In eastern Albania, an automatic rifle costs less than a kilo of bread.) Another problem is the refugee outflow to Italy and Greece that has increased ethnic tension throughout the region.

In Albania, as elsewhere in the transitional states of the former Soviet bloc, the U.S. made the critical mistake of backing one political force rather than supporting a pluralistic political process. More emphasis was placed on Berisha as a personality who would defeat communism and guarantee stability in the Balkans than on the construction of democratic institutions such as a depoliticized judiciary, a pluralistic parliament, and an independent media.

<h3>Key Problems</h3> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• For too long, the U.S. continued its unequivocal support of Berisha and his Democratic Party, despite growing signs of his undemocratic behavior.• The U.S. was Albania's second largest bilateral donor, providing the authoritarian state with economic, political, and military aid.• Washington's critical mistake was in supporting one political force in Albania instead of the political process.

To extricate Albania from its current chaos will not be easy. An essential step is to adopt an approach to the country that centers on support for democratic principles rather than on political personalities.

Any bilateral or multilateral assistance to the current caretaker government, or any future government, should be linked to the establishment of civil and political rights, the construction of democratic institutions, and respect for the rule of law. At the same time, the U.S. should continue pressuring President Berisha through all available means to respect Albanian law and work toward a peaceful solution to the crisis.

The caretaker government headed by Prime Minister Bashkim Fino has displayed a willingness to initiate democratic reform. But it needs concerted foreign assistance to fulfill its mandate of reestablishing order and preparing for new elections, tentatively scheduled for autumn 1997. Mindful of mistakes made in Bosnia, elections should not be held until the government (with the help of the peacekeeping force) secures neutral political atmosphere in which there is freedom of expression, association, and assembly.

the population is armed with weapons looted from army warehouses. The efficacy of collecting weapons from citizens will be directly related to the end of human rights abuses and the reestablishment of law and order, since individuals are more likely to hand in their arms when they no longer feel threatened by either the government or local gangs. In the future, foreign aid should be both linked to and allocated for the independence of the judiciary and training for a newly constituted civilian-controlled police force. The international community can help the Albanian government to establish an independent commission, perhaps with international participation, that would investigate both the pyramid schemes and the serious human rights abuses that were committed in Albania during the recent crisis. Holding criminals accountable will help restore people's faith in government institutions. In addition, the National Information Service (SHIK) and the other police units must be placed under the control of a depoliticized entity.

Democratization and economic development in Albania are worthy U.S. foreign policy goals. But as recent events have amply demonstrated, Washington's pursuit of short-term objectives, such as securing political stability in Albania and increasing military cooperation in the Balkans, may too easily take precedence over the need to support a dynamic democratic process. Channeling economic aid to U.S. political organizations such as the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute is an insufficient guarantee for advancing democracy. The anarchy in Albania in 1997 attests that such a strategy does not provide the necessary assurance that the democratic process will be maintained. By providing aid and support to a government responsible for violating basic citizen rights, the U.S. is at least partially responsible for Albania's current economic and political crisis.

The U.S. should realize that its strategic interests in the Balkans must not be measured by a country's willingness to cooperate militarily or to embrace U.S. free-market ideology. In the case of Albania, the U.S. should recognize that its military and economic aid strategies since 1991 have done little to create an economically and politically stable nation in southeastern Europe. Thus, U.S. foreign policy and aid practices toward Albania should undergo a thorough re-evaluation. In the future, all U.S. assistance should be strictly tied to respect for the basic human, political, and labor rights that form the basis for long-lasting stability.

Key Recommendations

- An essential step is to adopt an approach to the country that centers on support for democratic principles rather than on political personalities.
- The U.S. should condition all of its economic and political support on strict compliance with human rights guarantees.
- The U.S. should realize that its strategic interests in the Balkans must not be measured by a country's willingness to cooperate militarily or to embrace U.S. free-market ideology.

The international community should apply pressure on the president and officials at the state media to open television and radio to all political perspectives well in advance of the forthcoming elections. Although some nonparty newspapers have begun publishing again, the main source of news for the majority of the population is the state television, which remains tightly controlled by Berisha. Free and fair elections require the reworking of the electoral regulations and the so-called genocide law, under which the Berisha government unconstitutionally vetted "collaborators" with the communist-era secret police.

The U.S. and other international donors should recognize the importance of supporting election and human rights monitoring and of involving local nongovernmental organizations in these processes. It is also important for the international community to assist the caretaker government in initiating a comprehensive program for weapons collection, since a large percentage of

Foreign Policy in Focus is a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS). It is supported by subscriptions, by financial support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and by various church organizations. *In Focus* internships are available.

Editors
Martha Honey (IPS)
Tom Barry (IRC)

Production
Grant Moser

Communications Director
Erik Leaver (IRC)

Orders and subscription information:

Mail: PO Box 4506
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87196-4506
Phone: (505) 842-8288
Fax: (505) 246-1601
Email: resourcectr@igc.apc.org

Editorial inquiries and information:

IRC Editor	IPS Editor
Phone: (505) 388-0208	Phone: (202) 234-9382/3 ext. 232
Fax: (505) 388-0619	Fax: (202) 387-7915
Email: resourcectr@igc.apc.org	Email: ipsps@igc.apc.org
Website: http://www.zianet.com/infocus	

Sources for More Information

Organizations

Albania Helsinki Committee

Rr. Ali Demi, Pall 2, Shk 2, Apt. 12
Tirana, Albania
Voice: (355-42) 27490
Contact: Arben Puto

Albanian Human Rights Group

Rr. M. Shyri
p. 44 Sh. 4/37
Tirana, Albania
Voice: (355-42) 25060
Fax: (355-42) 39114
Contact: Elsa Ballauri

Human Rights Watch/Helsinki

485 Fifth Ave.
New York, NY 10017
Voice: (212) 972-8400
Fax: (212) 972-0905
Email: hrwnyc@hrw.org
Website: <http://www.hrw.org>
Contact: Fred Abrahams

International Republican Institute

1212 New York Avenue, NW, Ste. 900
Washington, DC 20005
Voice: (202) 408-9450
Fax: (202) 408-9462
Email: iri@iri.org
Website: <http://www.iri.org>
Contact: Eric Jowett

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe

Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
ul. Krucza 36/ Wspolna 600-522
Warsaw, Poland
Voice: (48-22) 625-7040
Fax: (48-22) 625-4357
Email: office@odihhr.osce.waw.pl

National Democratic Institute

1717 Massachusetts Ave, NW, Fifth Floor
Washington, DC 20036
Voice: (202) 328-3136
Fax: (202) 939-3166
Website: <http://www.ndi.org>

Press Now

Klaine-Gartmanplantsoen 10
1017 RR Amsterdam
The Netherlands
Voice: (31-20) 553-5165
Fax: (31-20) 553-5155
Email: PressNow@xs4all.nl

Publications

Dusko Doder, "Albania Opens the Door,"
National Geographic, July 1992.

Human Rights Watch/Helsinki, *Human Rights in Post-Communist Albania* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1996).

Jeri Laber, "Miserable Albania," *The New York Review of Books*, January 14, 1993.

Tina Rosenberg, "Albania: Habits of the Heart,"
The World Policy Journal, Winter 94/95.

U.S. House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights, *Hearing on Human Rights and Democracy in Albania* (Washington, DC: July 25, 1996).

U.S. Congressional Human Rights Caucus, *Hearing on Human Rights in Albania* (Washington, DC: June 19, 1996).

U.S. House Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Hearing on Challenges to Democracy in Albania* (Washington, DC: March 14, 1996).

U.S. House Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, *Human Rights and Democratization in Albania* (Washington, DC: January 1994).

World Wide Web

Albanian Home Page

<http://www.albaniannews.com>

Albanian Newspaper Koha Jone

<http://www.oneworld.org/news/reports/kohajone/>

Human Rights Watch

<http://www.hrw.org>

Back Issues of *Foreign Policy In Focus*

(\$2.50 each, postpaid)

Afghanistan	Haiti	Nigeria
Africa Overview	Human Rights	North Korea
Africa Peace and Security	Immigration Debate	Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament
Albania	Indochina	Overseas Drug Control
Arms Trade	Indonesia	Overseas Private Investment Corporation
Asia/Pacific Overview	Intelligence Apparatus	Overseas Rural Development Policy
Asia/Pacific Peace and Security	International Cooperation	Panama
Burundi	International Financial Institutions	Peacekeeping and the UN
CIA, Drugs, and Crack	International Trade	Russia
Central America Peace and Security	Investment and Competitiveness	Somalia
Chemical/Biological Weapons	Iraq	South Africa
China	Islamic Movements	Strategic Reach in the Middle East
Controlling the TNCs	Israel	Trade and Environment
Defense Conversion and Military Bases	Japan	Trade and Labor
Economic Policy Toward Africa	Mexico	Transitional States: Economic Restructuring
Export Import Bank	Middle East Oil	U.S.-U.N. Relations
Export Promotion Programs	Military Modernization and Budget	Warfare vs Welfare
Foreign Agricultural Policy	Military Strategy	World Trade Organization
Foreign Economic Aid	Multilateral Debt	
Former Yugoslavia	NAFTA	
Free Trade Area of Americas	NATO Expansion: Monetary Costs	

To subscribe to *Foreign Policy In Focus*, or to order back issues, contact the IRC at:

PO Box 4506 ♦ Albuquerque, NM ♦ 87196-4506

Phone: (505) 842-8288 ♦ Fax: (505) 246-1601 ♦ Email: resourcectr@igc.apc.org ♦ Website: <http://www.zianet.com/infocus>