

Mass anti-government protests hit Albania

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Mass protests shook Albania's capital city last week, with thousands pouring into the streets to demand the resignation of Socialist Party Prime Minister Edi Rama and his government. Skyrocketing prices are fueling social anger over deepening poverty, political corruption and authorities' indifference. The events in early July follow large demonstrations in March that were also animated by outrage over inflation, which at 7.4 percent as of last month is the highest the small Balkan country has witnessed in 20 years. Throughout 2021, it hovered around just 2 to 2.5 percent.

With little in the way of public transportation, the cost of fuel in particular is causing extreme hardship for Albanian families. Rama's government is blamed for worsening the problem because of its refusal to cut very high gas taxes, which account for 53 percent of the total fees consumers pay at the pump.

But prices across the board are rising, with foodstuffs leading the way. INSTAT, the government statistical agency, just reported that last month the cost of oils and fats rose by 30.3 percent, breads and cereals 19.1 percent, dairy and eggs 18.5 percent and vegetables 9 percent. "Culture and entertainment" were the only sectors where prices did not grow.

With food expenditures consuming 42 percent of households' budgets, according to INSTAT, hundreds of thousands in the tiny country of just 2.79 million people are being wiped out. The average family of 3.6 people brings home just €718 a month and about 20 percent of the population lives on less than \$5.50 a day. Albania, whose GDP per capita is just \$5,200 a year, about that of the African country of Namibia, is the fifth poorest nation in Europe. Due to a combination of mass emigration and falling birth rates, the country's population has shrunk by more than 500,000, about 15 percent, since the 1990s.

In response to March's mass demonstrations, at which hundreds were arrested, the Rama government

promised to raise the minimum wage to a mere €242 a month and to give the poorest households another €24 a month, an amount that will disappear with just a few trips to the grocery store. He also denounced his country's increasingly impoverished working class for not being willing to bear the cost of the US/NATO conflict with Russia, stating, "I'm ashamed that a NATO country doesn't understand the consequences of the war in Ukraine."

The Balkan Barometer 2022, a survey conducted by the Regional Cooperative Council, reveals Albania to be a country seething with social discontent. According to results published late last month, 42 percent of Albanians want to emigrate, 88 percent think social inequality is too big, 40 percent are unhappy with their financial situation, and 82 percent believe there is an "unequal application of the law"—in other words, everyone but the rich and powerful get a raw deal.

Defense attorneys staged a protest this Wednesday over forthcoming changes to Albania's judicial system that, through a redistricting process, will see a sharp decline in the number of courts. They insist this will further exacerbate the already sizeable backlog of cases in the country, such that the accused will languish in jails and the process of clearing their names will take ever-more time. Lawyers are boycotting the judicial system for another 10 days.

Albania's journalists also recently protested in the capital. In early July, a reporter was stripped of her government press credentials for three months and told by Prime Minister Rama that she was in need of "reeducation," after she posed a question to the country's leader about corruption in his inner circle.

Last week's demonstrations in Tirana were called by opposition politician Sali Berisha of the right-wing Democratic Party (DP). The former prime minister, whose own government was the object of widespread popular hatred when he was in office from 2005-2013,

is attempting to take advantage of the anger at the current center-left government in order to advance himself.

He just barely wrested back control of the DP from his rivals, who kicked him out of his leading position in the organization last year when US Secretary of State Antony Blinken issued a statement denouncing Berisha as corrupt and declaring that Washington would not work with the DP so long as Berisha was in charge. Berisha is currently on an American sanctions list and barred from entering the country.

On July 7, as anti-government protesters were gathering in Tirana, US ambassador to Albania Yuri Kim issued a statement counseling the demonstrators to “be peaceful” and abide by the law, as if the major problem was them and not the huge numbers of cops policing the demonstration.

Albania is a US ally and NATO member in the Balkans and, along with Greece, Italy, Poland, the US, Latvia, Turkey and Romania, is currently taking part in the Bulgarian-led Breeze 2022 NATO naval exercises in the Black Sea. Albania recently received anti-tank Javelin missiles from the US, as part of the American Congress’ recent legislation. Prime Minister Rama has now offered NATO use of the defunct Pashaliman naval base on Vlora Bay, which was once home to a Soviet fleet and gave the USSR its only access to the Mediterranean. If it takes Tirana up on the offer, NATO will add to its current arsenal in Albania, where it is in the process of renovating the Kucove Air Base.



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