

Student protests in Albania rattle government

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A wave of student protests has been rocking the Albanian capital, Tirana, since Tuesday. What began on 13 October as a rally of a few hundred students outside the Ministry of Education has, within a matter of days, grown into a broad-based movement against the entire government of Prime Minister Edi Rama.

By Wednesday, thousands had already gathered outside the ministry, after numerous residents of Tirana had joined the students. The buildings housing the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Justice were set alight during the protests, and protesters also broke into the Ministry of Finance and set documents on fire.

On Thursday, secondary school students joined the protests, and schools in the capital suspended lessons. Due to the protests, Parliament postponed a planned plenary session until next week. On Saturday, thousands protested again and violent street clashes broke out in the centre of Tirana.

The movement has now spread across the whole country. Starting in Kamza on the outskirts of Tirana, protests have taken place in Shkodra, Vlora, Lushnja, Elbasan, Durrës and Korçë. Many young people travelled from the provinces to Tirana to continue demonstrating there.

By Friday, around 50 protesters and several police officers had been injured in the capital alone. By Saturday, more than 167 mostly young demonstrators had been arrested. Criminal charges were brought against 388 people. In the centre of Tirana, a bank and university premises were vandalised.

The police are using extreme brutality against the protesters, some of whom are minors. They are deploying tear gas, water cannons, batons—and, for the first time on Saturday, rubber bullets—against the young protesters. Following widespread outrage at the brutal crackdown, five officers were reportedly suspended for assaulting bystanders.

The students are protesting directly against high tuition fees, unaffordable rents, a lack of financial support, appalling conditions at universities and a dearth of career prospects after graduation. Underlying this is a deep-seated social crisis. On paper, Albania is regarded as one of the most advanced European Union (EU) candidate countries, yet wages, purchasing power and public services lie far

below the EU average. For many years now, young people in particular have been leaving the country in droves.

Political scientist Afrim Krasniqi pointed out that students had been protesting peacefully for almost three months. He said the government has ignored their demands and responded with a vicious smear campaign. A law student told the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) that he was demonstrating so that corrupt politicians would be brought to justice.

Anjeza Marku, a 24-year-old student and music teacher, told the Austrian newspaper *Der Standard*: “We protested peacefully for 135 days, but those in power merely insulted the participants. The public sees the youth as Albania’s last hope—we have often even been compared to the youth in France. But the government couldn’t care less whether we protest peacefully. It won’t listen to our voices anyway.”

She added: “We refuse to engage in any discussion with this corrupt government. It has squandered our trust and does not deserve a second chance.”

The student protests are part of a wider protest movement that has gripped the Balkan state since the end of May. The trigger was a tourism project worth around €1.4 billion on the island of Sazan and along the coast near Zvërnec, right next to the Narta Lagoon, a protected habitat for flamingos. The main investor is Jared Kushner, the son-in-law of US President Donald Trump. After the coastline was cordoned off, the first villagers took to the streets on 23 May; on 30 May, private security personnel attacked demonstrators.

The movement, named after the birds of the lagoon, quickly spread to Tirana and other cities. It has become the largest wave of protests since the collapse of the Stalinist regime in the early 1990s and is deliberately organised independently of political parties. Its starting point—beaches, bays and nature reserves being handed over to billionaires while the population is literally shut out—has become a symbol of a system in which a narrow elite is selling the country off to international capital.

Albania is one of the poorest countries in Europe. More than a fifth of the population is officially classified as poor. The official unemployment rate stood at around 8 percent in the third quarter of 2025, though it was almost twice as high

among young people. Yet these official figures barely reflect the reality.

Rama dismissed the movement in the summer as part of a “hybrid war,” allegedly driven by disinformation and foreign interests. On Friday, he blamed the opposition and “foreign actors” for the violence, claiming they were seeking to hinder Albania’s path to the EU.

In the late 1990s, Rama—who had no previous experience in politics—took over the leadership of the Socialist Party (PS), the former Stalinist ruling party, which he transformed into a pro-EU party. He has been in power since 2013 and won a fourth term in office last year.

He has responded to the protests with his usual contempt for the population and has so far categorically ruled out resigning. The PS parliamentary group leader, Taulant Balla, blamed the opposition Democratic Party (PD) for the riots.

Rama and his government are deeply hated and riddled with corruption scandals. The Special Anti-Corruption Prosecutor’s Office (SPAK) has accused Deputy Prime Minister Belinda Balluku of interfering in the awarding of state construction contracts; Rama initially reinstated her after a brief suspension and only dismissed her in February 2026 during a cabinet reshuffle. Several former ministers are under investigation.

The protesters cannot expect any support from the EU. The EU delegation in Tirana merely issued a terse call for a “proportionate” response from the authorities. Yet Brussels has been supporting the Rama government for years—not least because of his agreement with Italy’s Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni regarding camps for refugees on Albanian soil, designed to prevent them from travelling on to EU countries.

The right-wing PD, led by former President and Prime Minister Sali Berisha, is attempting to co-opt the movement. It claims to support the students’ demands and is calling for a transitional government and early general elections. Berisha hypocritically threw his weight behind the protests and called on doctors and nursing staff to join them.

However, the Albanian people have had more than enough experience of Berisha and other right-wing, corrupt politicians of his ilk. In Tirana, demonstrators are chanting “Rama to prison, Berisha to prison.” PD MPs who sought to join the protest were asked to leave the demonstrations.

Berisha, who was himself charged with corruption and money laundering in 2023 and is subject to a US travel ban, initially supported the Kushner project and only turned against it once the protests spread. Both the PS and the PD stand for privatisation, attacks on social welfare and self-enrichment, which have pervaded Albania since the capitalist restoration.

As early as 2018, a student movement forced Rama to

dismiss eight ministers and announce a “Pact for the University.” This did nothing to change the fundamental conditions. Neither a cabinet reshuffle nor Berisha’s return will solve the problems.

The events in Albania are not an isolated phenomenon. In France, school students have been blocking their secondary schools since mid-September. They are protesting against overcrowded and dilapidated classrooms, a shortage of teachers, overwhelming timetables and Parcoursup, the French online portal for university admissions. At the same time, Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu is pushing through austerity measures totalling €54 billion, while tens of billions are being channelled into the military.

On Saturday, as the situation in Albania escalated, 800,000 people took to the streets in France. Mass demonstrations against high rents, rising prices and unsustainable living conditions have also been taking place for weeks in Spain, Belgium, Portugal and Ireland.

In France too, the movement escalated into a confrontation between young people, the working class and the government. According to the Ministry of Education, lessons were suspended in whole or in part at 891 schools across France, 250 of which were in the Greater Paris area. The National Union of Secondary School Students (USL) put the number of schools blocked by pupils or closed by the authorities at around 1,800, while the Students’ Union reported blockades at 57 universities, including the Sorbonne and the ENS Paris-Saclay.

The police responded to the protests with brutal force. Two students each lost a hand as a result of police grenades, and another was left blind in one eye. Since 28 September, more than 6,000 people have been arrested, the vast majority of them minors.

Here too, the anger is by no means directed solely at dilapidated schools. Many young people are recalling May 1968, when the repression against students triggered a general strike.

The protests in Albania and France are part of an international wave of class struggle that has also swept through other countries, such as Spain and Belgium. Everywhere, the anger of young people and workers is directed against the same trends: austerity, social inequality, police repression, militarisation and war.



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