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## U.S. Department of State

### Albania Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 1996

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, January 30, 1997.

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#### ALBANIA

Albania is a parliamentary republic with a Parliament elected in a seriously flawed process. Pending a new constitution, the Law on Major Constitutional Provisions, which includes a Law on Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms, serves in its place. The governing Democratic Party won 122 out of the 140 parliamentary seats, an 87.1 percent majority, in flawed multiparty elections in May. The major opposition party, the Socialist Party, together with some small center parties, staged a boycott of the election process several hours before the polls closed, citing reports of widespread Government-sponsored fraud, beatings, and intimidation. They refused to recognize the newly elected Parliament's legitimacy. President Sali Berisha, elected by Parliament in 1992, continued his 5-year term. The law provides for the separation of powers and an independent judiciary. However, the judicial branch remains subject to strong executive pressure and corruption.

Local police detachments reporting to the Ministry of the Interior are principally responsible for internal security. In addition to their usual tasks, police were responsible for securing order during the parliamentary and local elections in May and October respectively. There were numerous allegations of police abuse before, during, and after the May elections. In September Parliament passed new legislation governing police conduct during the October elections. The Albanian National Intelligence Service (SHIK) is legally responsible for both external and domestic intelligence collection and counterintelligence functions. SHIK's internal responsibilities include gathering information on government corruption and anticonstitutional activities in support of law enforcement agencies. Given the activities of the former security service (Sigurimi) under the Communists, some citizens perceive SHIK as a similar organization and fear it accordingly.

Albania is a poor country experiencing the painful transition of reform after nearly 50 years of a Stalinist, centrally planned economy. Its economy remains based on agriculture, but a rapidly growing commercial and trade sector has taken root in cities and larger towns. Construction is the fastest growing sector. There is some mining and light manufacturing (clothes, shoes, beverages, and consumer products). Most state-owned heavy industry is moribund. The Government continued privatizing medium and large state enterprises, a process begun in 1994. Privatization has expanded to many sectors of the economy and continues in the mining, energy distribution network, telecommunications, and textiles sectors. Remittances from Albanians working abroad and foreign assistance remain major sources of income. With the lifting of sanctions against Serbia and Montenegro at the end of 1995, the country lost a significant source of hard currency from organized fuel smuggling to those countries. Prices for key consumer items such as bread, electricity, and kerosene were freed from state control at midyear, creating additional hardships for public sector workers and pensioners on fixed incomes, but moving the overall economy toward greater efficiency. Salary increases and subsidies for public sector workers and those receiving pensions helped offset these increases. Overall economic growth remained strong, about 6 percent for the second year in a row. Inflation, which was near zero at the end of 1995, was expected to exceed 20 percent in 1996, largely as a result of growing government budget deficits. While per capita gross domestic product reached approximately \$650, more than double that in 1992, the economic transformation has created an emerging middle class as well as widening in