



*U.S. Embassy Tirana, Albania  
Ambasada e Sh.B.A. në Tiranë, Shqipëri*

**March 6, 2007**

**Country Report of the Department of State  
on Human Rights Practices for 2006**

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The constitution and law provide for freedom of speech and of the press, and the government generally respected these rights in practice. While the media was active and largely unrestrained, there were serious problems with the use of the media for political purposes.

Politicization of the media remained an issue of concern and, in the run up to local elections planned for January 2007, appeared to be on the upswing in the final quarter of the year. The polarization of media outlets into opposing camps has become more pronounced. Publishers and newspaper owners continued to dictate news stories to serve their political and economic interests and sometimes blocked stories that ran counter to those interests. Journalists continued to practice self-censorship, and there was little transparency in the financing of the media.

In general individuals could freely criticize the government and its actions in print and broadcasts. However, in May the activist movement *Mjaf!* reported that police disrupted its efforts to disseminate a poster critical of the prime minister. After approximately 1,000 posters were hung around the city of Tirana, police forces reportedly removed the posters and confiscated the remaining 4,000 that had not been posted. There were no reports that officials used or threatened to use libel suits to limit free political discussion.

The independent print media were active but were constrained by limited professionalism, lack of finances, and political pressure. Political parties, trade unions, and various societies and groups published their own newspapers or magazines independent of government influence. An estimated 200 publications were available, including daily and weekly newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and pamphlets. One new major national daily newspaper, *Shqip*, started in the spring while two others, *Dita* and *Express*, closed.

According to official data, there were 64 private television stations and 44 private radio stations, but the actual number was reportedly larger. While stations generally operated free of direct government influence, most owners believed that the content of their broadcasts could influence government action toward their other businesses.

The public Albanian Radio and Television (RTSH) operated a national television channel and a national radio station. RTSH devoted most of its coverage to the government and the ruling party. By law, the government provides 50 percent of the station's budget. During the year Kico Blushi, chairman of the RTSH Steering Council, resigned to protest parliament's postponing a request to dismiss television director Artur Zheji. Blushi claimed that RTSH was still hostage to politics and the government, thus failing to fulfill its public mission.

In May parliament amended the Law on Broadcast Media, restructuring the RTSH Steering Council and the National Council of Media, which is responsible for licensing and regulation and dismissing the previous members of the council. The opposition charged that the new law was a political maneuver designed to weaken the independence of the two regulatory bodies by tilting them in favor of the government. The amendment also called for the appointment of media professionals and representatives of civil society in lieu of representatives of the political parties.

In contrast to 2005 there was only one report that police or other officials physically abused journalists. In February a television reporter accused police officer Kastriot Caushi of the Lushnje Police Commissariat and members of the Republican Guard of using excessive force to keep reporters from interviewing the president. The reporter suffered minor injuries from the incident.

In 2005 the editorial office of the top-circulation daily *Shekulli* was damaged when an explosive was thrown onto its balcony. While nobody was harmed, there was damage to the office. A spokesperson for the newspaper reported that the case was closed with no formal charges having been filed.

Political intimidation of the media persisted. Journalists continued to complain that publishers and editors censored their work either directly or indirectly in response to political and commercial pressures. Many journalists complained that the absence of employment contracts frequently hindered their ability to report objectively.

In September the council of ministers passed a resolution to evict Top Channel TV, a leading television station that had been critical of the government, from a state-owned building in central Tirana. The government said it intended to use the space to promote art and culture. Citing a long-term lease with the Ministry of the Economy, the company charged that this move was an attempt to put pressure on the station for its editorial content. At year's end the case was still ongoing.

Libel is a crime that may be punished with a prison sentence of up to two years and a fine. In contrast with the previous year, there were no cases of libel suits against the media reported during the year.

#### Internet Freedom

There were no government restrictions on access to the Internet or reports that the government monitored e-mail or Internet chatrooms. Access to the Internet has increased over the year, but remained limited, particularly outside the major urban areas.