

Albania: escalation of protests

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Since mid-October, violence has escalated *during the ongoing anti-government protests in Albania, which began in May*. Until recently, the demonstrations, driven primarily by demands for the resignation of Prime Minister Edi Rama, had remained peaceful. This changed when members of Generation Z, mainly university and secondary school students, joined the protests. They attacked public buildings and set fire to several facilities, including the headquarters of the education and infrastructure ministries and a police station. Police responded with force, beating demonstrators with batons and using tear gas, rubber bullets and stun grenades. Protesters have used Molotov cocktails, with many covering their faces. Around 1,000 demonstrators have been detained or arrested, and at least 388 are now facing charges. Approximately 300 people, including police officers, have required hospital treatment following the clashes. Reuters journalists have also sustained injuries from rubber bullets.

Violence is intensifying on both sides of the conflict between the government and the protest movement, fuelled by growing frustration among Albanians over the prime minister's refusal to respond to their demands. The protest campaign will continue, and further escalation is possible in the coming days. Neither side is willing to back down or sees any room for compromise.

Commentary

- **The peaceful protests have so far yielded no results.** The shift towards more radical forms of protest stems from frustration and growing disillusionment with the situation in the country, particularly among young people. With the start of the academic year, they have been confronted with underfunded higher education, steep rents and the high cost of living in the capital. Consequently, the demonstrators have expanded their demands to include reforms in these areas. Their principal demand, however, remains the resignation of Prime Minister Edi Rama and the appointment of a technocratic government for a 12-month period.
- **Many Albanians accept the violent nature of the student protests.** Organisers of the so-called Flamingo Revolution marches, NGOs and some media outlets regard attacks on security forces as a justified expression of frustration with the government. The main opposition force, the Democratic Party, has also sought to justify the arson attacks. Moreover, the actions of young protesters have prompted residents of smaller towns, where demonstrations had partly subsided over the summer, to take to the streets again, though these protests have been less aggressive. Academic staff have also expressed

support for the students, with their largest trade union calling for a temporary suspension of classes.

- **The European Union and the United States have called on both sides to end the violence.** Representatives of the European Parliament and the US Congress have voiced stronger criticism of the Albanian authorities, highlighting the disproportionate use of force by the police and other security services, particularly against young people. This includes beatings of demonstrators, some of them minors, during protests and brutal treatment in police stations. A police unit's raid on an Orthodox church in Tirana, where officers made arrests, has also drawn criticism.
- **Prime Minister Edi Rama is seeking to discredit the protest movement.** At the same time, he has vowed to remain in office, arguing that his departure would plunge the country into chaos. He has accused the protesters of jeopardising Albania's EU membership prospects. At a press conference, he attempted to persuade US journalists that Antifa was behind the unrest, although he provided no evidence to support this claim. Meanwhile, the authorities have been tightening security measures around government buildings. Special police units have been assigned to protect the prime minister's office, and Rama has cancelled some of his official trips abroad.
- **As a result of Rama's policies, Albania's EU accession process is stagnating.** Despite the closure of the third negotiating chapter, Albania has been very slow to adopt and implement reforms. EU institutions have overstated Albania's progress by placing it alongside Montenegro among the frontrunners in the accession process. During a recent visit to Tirana, the president of the European Commission highlighted concerns over pressure on the judiciary and the state of the rule of law in Albania. Meanwhile, Rama has focused on cultivating a positive image abroad while ignoring pressing domestic problems and the need to implement reforms expected by the EU.
- **The unrest in Albania's capital fits into a broader global pattern of Generation Z protests**, which primarily involve university and secondary school students and are directed against the political system. As in Serbia, the protests have also targeted corruption among the ruling elites. Like their French counterparts, young Albanians are demanding greater investment in education and lower rents. They have also been covering their faces, as protesters have done elsewhere. Furthermore, the violent nature of the Albanian protests makes them similar to demonstrations by this generation in other countries, such as Nepal.