

## Country Snapshot

**Country Name:**

Albania

**Year Founded:**

1912

**Population:**

3,581,655 (2006 est.)

**Government Type:**

Emerging democracy

**Geography:**

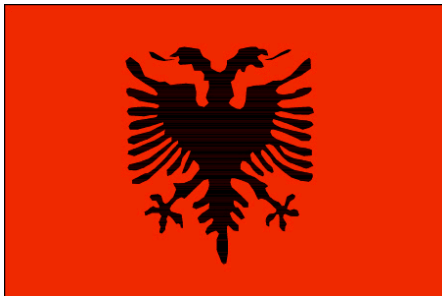
- Located in Southeastern Europe (the Balkans)
- Bordered by the Adriatic Sea on the west, the Ionian Sea on the southwest. Also shares borders with Serbia/Montenegro, Macedonia, and Greece.
- Albania's terrain is very mountainous; 70% of its land lies above 1,000 feet. The coastal regions in the west mostly consist of low hills that open onto a coastal plain.
- The climate is mild/temperate with cool, wet winters and dry, hot summers
- Albania is prone to moderately severe earthquakes.

**People groups:**

- Albanian--98.6%
- Greek--1.7%
- Other--0.23%

(Accurate data regarding Albania's ethnic minorities is hard to come by. The last Albanian census that recorded this data was taken in 1989. In 1989 the Greek minority population was estimated at 2%. Currently, the Greek community in Albania estimates that its numbers could be as high as 10% of the population.)

**Picture of flag:**



## Religion Snapshot

### Major Religion:

Muslim (Sunni and Bektashi)—70%

### Other religions:

Albanian Orthodox—20%

Roman Catholic—10%

### Government interaction with religion:

Freedom of religion

# Mission Atlas Project

## Central and Eastern Europe

### Albania

#### Demographics

The population of Albania was an estimated 3,581,655 in 2006 with a positive population growth rate of 0.52%. Since the end of World War II Albania has had one of the highest birthrates in Europe, as well as one of the continent's lowest death rates. During Albania's Communist years, a high population growth rate was state policy and that momentum is still there. Albania is a fairly young country, as well; the median age of Albanians is 28.9 years. Albanians have an average life expectancy of 71.94 years.

According to official data from the Albanian government, Albania is one of the most ethnically homogeneous countries in the world. Recent census data reports that over 98% of Albania's population is ethnically Albanian. Ethnic Albanians are then divided into two distinct groups, Albanian Tosks and Albanian Ghegs. Tosks and Ghegs are ethnically identical but are distinguished by where they live (Tosks inhabit southern Albania while Ghegs live in the north) and which dialect they speak. Both Tosks and Ghegs speak Albanian but each group has their own dialect which differs slightly from the other in vocabulary and pronunciation. Tosks and Ghegs also differ in personality. Tosks are known as fun-loving, outgoing, and talkative while Ghegs are typically more solemn. Tosks are the majority, outnumbering Ghegs by about 300,000 people and dominating Albanian cultural and political life. Also, since the Tosk dialect is most widely spoken in Albania, all Albanian publications are printed in Tosk.

The most significant ethnic minorities in Albania are Serb and Greek; there are several other ethnic groups represented as well, but in much smaller numbers. If demographic information from the government is true, ethnic minorities only comprise 2% of Albania's population. While most Albanians would believe these statistics to be a true representation of Albania's ethnic makeup, accurate data regarding Albania's ethnic minorities is impossible to come by. The last Albanian census that recorded ethnic data was taken in 1989.

More and more Albanians are leaving rural areas to move to urban ones. In 2003, 43% of the population lived in urban areas compared to only 1/5 of the population in 1950. Albania's capital and largest city is Tirana (pop. 700,000). Other major cities are Durres (pop. 400,000), Shkoder (pop. 81,000) and Vlore (pop. 72,000).

Albania has a serious housing shortage. The shortage began after World War II; during the war over 60,000 buildings were destroyed, including over 35,000 residences. As Albania began to rebuild, much of the focus was on rebuilding industrial structures causing housing to be overlooked. To make matters worse, a large influx of rural dwellers began to move to Albania's cities. During Communist years, the state built thousands of apartment buildings in the cities of Tirane, Vlore, Elbasa, Shkoder, Durres, and Korce in an attempt to catch up with the ever-increasing demand for houses. While the situation is notably better today, the lack of suitable housing remains a problem that Albania has yet to solve.

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561564/Albania.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561564/Albania.html)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albania>

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/al.html>

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3235.htm>

<http://www.joshuaproject.net/peopctry.php?rop3=100222&rog3=AL>

WorldMark Encyclopedia of the Nations, pp. 1-13

## Language

The official language of Albania is Albanian. There are two Albanian dialects—Tosk and Gheg (see demographics section). Tosk is the official dialect. Albanian developed from the Illyrian language, now dead. Albanian is now the only surviving modern representative of a distinct Indo-European language.

Many Albanians speak English, Italian, and Greek as trade languages. There are many small pockets of ethnic minorities across Albania so it is not uncommon to hear their heart languages spoken.

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561564/Albania.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561564/Albania.html)

## Society/Culture

Albanian society operated under tribal and semi feudal systems until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Gheg society in northern Albania was primarily tribal. The extended family was the basic social unit, normally consisting of a married couple, their married sons and their families, and any unmarried daughters. These family units were single entities, living in a cluster of houses centered around the father's house. They shared ownership of all economic and material assets and were committed to the well-being and protection of the group. These extended families could grow to encompass as many as 60-70 individuals. These families were then grouped into clans, and the clans into tribes. Each clan was led by a chief who acted as employer, matchmaker, and judge. He also set the tone for how the clan would behave in political matters. Almost from the day of his birth the oldest male child in a family was being groomed to take over the head-of-household duties on the occasion of his father's death. The head of household's word was law.

Women did not fare well in this male-dominated society. Arranged marriages were the norm. Women did not stray far from the home, treated more like servants than wives. They could not even eat at the same table as the men. Women could not own property and did not have the right to seek a divorce from their husband. The ancient law of northern Albania, the Code of Lek, even gave a man permission to "beat his wife and to bind her in chains if she defies his words and orders."

[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+a10053\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+a10053))

Southern Albania has always had more exposure to the outside world than northern Albania. The result was a weakened sense of tribalism. When the Ottomans took over Albania in the 15<sup>th</sup> century they instituted a semi feudal system in the south. Powerful Muslim lords eventually took over at least 2/3 of Albania's farmland, reducing the Tosks to little more than slaves. The extended family still remained the central social unit, though the head of household did not hold much authority since all Tosks were oppressed by Muslim landowners.

Communism brought an end to most aspects of the clan system. Heads of households still demand enormous respect but women have begun to come into their own in the last half-century. The Communist system guaranteed equal rights for women. These "equal rights" were mainly rights that would benefit the state, such as allowing women to enter the work force, which many women took advantage of. Today women comprise almost half of Albania's workforce. Access to birth control, however, was not a guaranteed right for women since the state wanted women to have children. The status of women has continued to improve since the democratic reforms of the 1990s, although women still remain mostly excluded from Albanian political life. The home is considered the woman's domain; men typically remain removed from household tasks.

As a guest in an Albanian home, one is expected to exchange greetings in the traditional Albanian manner. The ritual begins with the guest being served a snack of some sort, usually a piece of cake or pastry, and Turkish coffee by the hostess or another female family member. After the guest is seated with the treat, he is then expected to specifically inquire about the health of every member of the

hostess' family. The hostess will then reciprocate. Natural conversation will only begin after this form of greeting is complete. Even though they are strict observers of traditional social practices, Albanians are very relaxed in their relationships. They love to laugh, tell stories and jokes, and are extremely expressive. Every day in coffee houses across Albania men gather to drink coffee and entertain each other with stories. These stories can be told for laughs (especially stories about the former Communist regime) or with reverence (stories about Albanian folk figures or national heroes).

Daily life is not easy in Albania. The standard of living is much lower than other European countries; of course this is expected since Albania is Europe's poorest country. During Communism many people had no choice but to live in huge, block apartment buildings. These buildings were very poorly constructed, as well as severely overcrowded. Many times a family of 4+ people only had one or two rooms to call their own. The standard of living has improved in recent years with the fall of Communism, although suitable housing is still a problem for many. Most residences do not have central heating and cooling; water shortages abound resulting in an inconsistent supply. There are many houses that have no central plumbing. Power outages are also common. Albanian homemakers have only recently gained access to modern appliances that were not available in Albania before 1992—washing machines, dishwashers, and microwaves.

Hard work is prized in Albania and workers take much pride doing even menial, dirty jobs with excellence. One need only look at Albanian proverbs to know this. Sayings such as "A man at home (i.e. not working) is like the devil in a mosque," "The day without work, the night without sleep," and "Clean hand, empty stomach" clearly communicate the value Albanians place on an honest day's work. ([http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albanian\\_proverbs](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albanian_proverbs))

Albanian Christians and Albanian Muslims observe completely different holidays. Albanian Christians (Catholic, Orthodox, or otherwise) join Christians around the world in celebrating traditional Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter while Albanian Muslims observe traditional Muslim holidays, such as Ramadan. All Albanians celebrate Spring Day (*Dita e Veres*), a holiday derived from an ancient pagan holiday, in mid-March in Elbasan, a small city in central Albania. Albanian Independence Day (*Dita e Flamurit*) is also celebrated all across Albania on November 28, commemorating the day in 1912 when the Albanian flag was first raised in proclamation of independence from the Ottoman Empire.

Albanian food shows obvious signs of Turkish influence. This should not be surprising in light of over 500 years of Ottoman control. Italian influence should also be noted, especially in coastal areas. Bread is the staple of the Albanian diet, so much so that the word *buke* is used interchangeably to represent either "bread" (the word's literal meaning) or "meal". Lamb is the most common meat. Albania also has many different seasonal fruits (grapes, cherries, peaches, etc.) as well as almonds, walnuts, hazelnuts, and olives. The national drink is *raki*. *Raki*, produced from grapes, is a clear and colorless brandy.

Not so long ago Albanians could be recognized simply by the clothes they wore; one's clothing would instantly tell others which region of the country they came from and potentially which Albanian dialect they would speak as well as what religion they were. Now, as western influences have flooded Albania, traditional dress is usually only found in very remote rural areas or as costumes at folk festivals.

Any non-Albanian traveling through or moving to Albania should be aware of a strange anomaly that becomes glaringly obvious upon arrival in Tirana, the capital city: the streets have no names. During the Communist regime, all of Tirana's streets were given appropriately communist names. When the regime collapsed in 1991 the people of Albania tore down or scratched out these street signs, not realizing that Albania's fledgling democratic government might have more important things to deal with than renaming all of Tirana's streets. However, over a decade later, there has still been very little progress in this area. Nameless streets create many problems. Some are simply annoying, like not being able to find your way to an appointment in an unfamiliar area of the city or not getting your mail on time. Others, like an ambulance not being able to find your house in an emergency, are far

more serious. (<http://newsvote.bbc.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4062429.stm>)

One sad reality in Albanian society is the existence of blood feuds. Blood feuds, today mostly confined to Albania's northern mountainous regions, stretch far back into Albanian history, stemming from the blood for blood mentality that was the primary method of avenging family honor in Albanian's clan-centered culture. Every year over 1000 men and boys die in Albania at the hand of a relative seeking vengeance for the killing of a family member. Blood feuds find their roots in Albania's customary law, *Kanun*, a written legal code dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The *Kanun* did not make new laws as much as it put many of Albania's ancient customary practices down on paper. One of the first rules of the *Kanun* is that whoever kills should be killed. However, over the centuries, this has been taken to the extreme. For example, a family in northern Albania is homebound, living in hiding for fear of retribution for a crime none of them committed. A man named Gjin says, "Five years ago, the family of a man who was killed came out of the blue—they said to me that my father was involved in the killing of their uncle, so they'd come to seek blood." (<http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4273020.stm>) The alleged murder took place immediately following Albania's liberation from the German occupation during World War II, 1945-46. A lesser-known portion of the *Kanun* says that the blood of the victim may only be avenged with the blood of the person who did the killing. Most people, especially young people, have no idea what the *Kanun* actually says, however, and simply use it as an excuse to kill, targeting any male in the killer's family.

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561564/Albania.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561564/Albania.html)

[http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albanian\\_proverbs](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albanian_proverbs)

WorldMark Encyclopedia of Culture and Daily Life, pp. 26-31

[http://www.gendercide.org/case\\_honour.html](http://www.gendercide.org/case_honour.html)

<http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4273020.stm>

<http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4062429.stm>

## **Government**

From 1944 to 1991 Albania was governed by the Albanian Party of Labor (APL), the Communist Party of Albania. Before Communist rule, Albania was under Ottoman control for 500 years with only a brief period of tumultuous self-rule between the two. Albania's first post-Communist constitution was ratified in 1998, establishing a parliamentary republic. Albania is now a republic but democracy in Albania is still in its infancy.

The two-member executive branch is comprised of the president and the prime minister. The president is elected by a 3/5 majority of the People's Assembly (parliament) to five-year terms with a two-term limit. The president then appoints the prime minister, based on nominations by the majority party of the Assembly. The president serves a largely ceremonial role as Albania's head of state. He has very limited power and seemingly no power at all over the Assembly; whether the president approves a law or not, if the majority of the Assembly approves it, it passes. The prime minister serves as head of government and the chairman of the Council of Ministers (cabinet). The Council of Ministers, led by the prime minister, oversees Albania's economic, social, cultural affairs. The president and the prime minister share control over the armed forces as well as Albania's foreign affairs and security issues.

Albania's unicameral legislature, the People's Assembly (*Kuvendi Popullor*), has 140 seats. Only 100 of these seats are filled based on direct popular vote; proportional representation determines the other 40 deputies. Each member serves a four-year term. The People's Assembly, along with passing laws, oversees the president's selection of a prime minister and the prime minister's selection of members for the Council of Ministers.

Albania's judicial system is headed by a Supreme Court. Each justice is appointed by the president to a nine-year term with the approval of the Assembly. The appeals courts operate below the Supreme Court and the district courts below the appeals courts. There is also a Constitutional Court that handles only constitutional cases; its nine judges are appointed by the president and approved by the Assembly.

In terms of local government, Albania is divided into regions. Those regions are then divided into communes and municipalities. Each commune and municipality has its own popularly elected council that governs its economic, social, and cultural affairs. The regions are governed by regional councils. These regional councils include the chairman for each communal or municipal council, delegates from local districts, and a prefect appointed by the Council of Ministers. In 1998 there were 36 regions, 310 communes, and 43 municipalities.

The government continues to provide free medical care for its citizens, picking up where the Communists left off, but the care is sub par due to outdated equipment and methods as well as a shortage of supplies. Albania also has a state social insurance program that covers every worker in the country for free.

Corruption is a large problem in all areas of the government. In 2002 the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index scored Albania a 2.5 on a 0 - 10 point corruption scale, 0 representing the negative end of the scale. Also in 2002, the Southeast European Legal Development Initiative (<http://www.seldi.net>) conducted a survey in several southern European countries, including Bosnia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania, Croatia, and Albania. Across the board, those surveyed in Albania reported a markedly higher rate of corruption in all areas of government and social services than any of their neighbors. Survey participants were asked about the prevalence of corruption in different groups. Their responses were shocking.

- Customs officers—86.6%
- Judges—80.1%
- Tax officials—79%
- Public prosecutors—70.9%
- Municipal officials—69.1%
- Administration officials in the judicial system—63%
- Police Officers—56.4%

And, although not directly employed by the government 71.6% of doctors were considered corrupt, along with 42.6% of business people, 46% of university professors/officials, and 24.4% of bankers. A recent World Bank survey indicates that over 50% of Albanians admit to having bribed a public official since 1999.

Albanians also reported the highest levels of (1) pressure from corrupt officials seeking illegal compensation, (2) tolerance of corruption in general, (3) involvement in corrupt activities, and (4) pessimism over their country's ability to deal with corruption.

The Albanian constitution guarantees its citizens the right to freely practice the religion of their choice. Three sizable religious groups (Islam, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholic) coexist in Albania with little or no tension between them. The State Committee on Cults was founded in 1999 to oversee church and state relations.

<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/UNTC/UNPAN017450.pdf>  
[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561564/Albania.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561564/Albania.html)  
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3235.htm>  
[http://atheism.about.com/library/irf/irf00/blirf\\_albania00.htm](http://atheism.about.com/library/irf/irf00/blirf_albania00.htm)

## **Economy**

Albania is one of Europe's poorest, least-developed countries. It lags far behind its Balkan neighbors in transitioning from Communism to a market economy, primarily because it was one of the last of these countries to begin free market reforms. Also, Hoxha's devastating economic policies left the country crippled and at a severe disadvantage from the get go.

Albania's initial steps toward a free-market economy were encouraging. When its first post-Communist government assumed office in the early 1990s they began implementing an ambitious series of economic reforms including privatization, enterprise and financial sector reform, and a new legal framework for market economy/private sector activity. Progress began to slow in the mid 1990s and then the pyramid schemes collapse in the late 1990s devastated Albania's economy. It is still trying to recover.

Agriculture is currently Albania's largest industry; 24% of Albanian's 1.4 million-member labor force work in agriculture. Albanian farmers tend to shy away from industrial crops like cotton and produce large amounts of wheat, corn, sugar beets, sunflower seeds, tobacco, fruit, and potatoes. Dairy farming is also becoming more common. Agriculture accounts for approximately 34% of Albania's GDP (an estimated \$18.97 billion in 2005). Industry (13%), services (32%), and remittances from Albanians who work abroad (21%) comprise the remainder of Albania's economy.

One of Albania's largest economic problems is its severe trade imbalance. For example, in 2002 Albania imported \$1.8 billion in American products but only exported \$350 million to the U.S. Albania has Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with Macedonia, Croatia, Kosovo, and Bulgaria. They are currently negotiating FTAs with Romania, Bosnia, and Moldova. Trade with these countries, however, only amounts to a small percentage of Albania's overall trade. Most of Albania's trade is done with Greece, Italy, and Turkey; these three countries account for nearly 75% of Albania's trade.

There are several significant barriers to improving Albania's economy. First of all, agriculture, Albania's primary industry, could be much more profitable than it is but it is held back by drought, antiquated methods and equipment, and property disputes. Secondly, energy shortages and poor infrastructures add to the instability of the Albanian economy making Albanian an unattractive option for foreign investors. Finally, Albania's transportation system is terrible; their railway system is limited by the mountainous terrain and there are very few domestic airports. On a more positive note, growth has been stronger in the past few years and inflation is currently not a problem. The Albanian government is committed to joining the EU in coming years. Albania signed a Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in June 2006 as a first step in the process.

## **Poverty in Albania**

The World Bank's November 2003 Poverty Assessment reported Albania's average per capita income was U.S. \$1,230 in 2002. Albania's official unemployment rate was 14.3% in 2005 but it is believed to actually exceed 30%. At least 30% of the population lives below the poverty level. What does that mean exactly? In practical terms, it means that:

- 17.5% of the population lives with inadequate water and sanitation
- 12.5% of the population has inadequate housing
- 13.5% of the population has an inadequate energy supply
- 16.7% of the population lives with extreme crowding (3+ people per room)
- 61.2% of Albania's heads of household have not been educated past primary school

For poor families, necessities must come first, causing things like education and quality of life to suffer. The budget breakdown for poor families in Albania looks like this:

- 62.8% is spent on food



- 22.6% is spent on non-food necessities
- 12.3% is spent on utilities
- 2.3% is spent on education

Poverty in Albania has created clusters of “vulnerable” people that many times fall between the cracks or become burdens on the Albanian economy. These clusters include:

- Vulnerable children (0-14 years)—these children are either biological/social orphans, children of single parents, children who are forced to enter the work force at a young age, or school dropouts. They represent 5.7% of all the children living in Albania.
- Vulnerable youth (14-25 years)—they young people are unemployed, drug/alcohol addicts with criminal records. 22.8% of Albania’s youth fit this description. The majority of young poor people live in families with 7+ members. More than 25% of Albania’s total poor population is under 25 years of age.
- Vulnerable women—these are women who have been divorced, sexually/physically abused, or are victims of human trafficking/prostitution. 5.7% of women in Albania fall into this category.
- Mentally or physically disabled—1.4% of Albania’s population is considered disabled but there are very few services available to this population segment. For example, an estimated 12,000 of Albania’s children are disabled but state institutions only provide support services for 9.5% of those 12,000.
- Vulnerable elderly—as much as 12.7% of Albania’s senior adult population is considered “vulnerable”. These are senior adults who live on their own, who have been abandoned by their families and left with limited income, and are unable to care for themselves properly.
- Roma and Egyptian children—these children have fewer opportunities than ethnic Albanians. Their household incomes are half that of the average Albanian. Their families cannot afford to feed or clothe them, much less educate them. Around 60% of Roma and Egyptian families cannot afford the cost of books and school supplies for their children, making it difficult for them to attend school. As a result, illiteracy is a huge problem; 64% of Roma and 24% of Egyptians ages 7-20 are illiterate. Many of them have illiterate parents, as 40% of Roma and 11.3% of Egyptians ages 20-40 are also illiterate.

<http://www.seda.org.al/NHDR/CH3.pdf>

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/al.html>

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3235.htm>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albania>

## **Literacy**

By Albanian standards a person is considered literate if they are 9 years of age or older and they can read and write. In 2003 Albania’s literacy rate was 86.5%. There is a large gap between male and female literacy rates—93.3% of males are literate compared to 79.5% of females.

Illiteracy has always been a struggle in Albania. One of the few positive effects of Communism in the country was the dramatic decrease in illiteracy. Now, post-Communism, education is free and compulsory for all children ages 6 to 13; only 81% of children attend secondary school.

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/al.html>

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561564/Albania.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561564/Albania.html)

## **Land/Geography**

Albania is located in southeastern Europe, bordered by the Adriatic Sea on the west; it also shares borders with Greece, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM), and Serbia and Montenegro.

Its landmass is roughly the size of the state of Massachusetts. Albania is a mountainous country. Almost 70% of its land lies 1000 feet above sea level. There are coastal plains in the west that rise into low, rolling hills in more eastern regions. These plains are Albania's most densely populated areas; they also contain most of Albania's farmland.

Albania has a mild temperate climate. It has cool, gray winters with lots of rainfall. Its summers are hot and clear with little rain. The more central and eastern areas of the country are wetter and also experience cooler temperatures.

Albania is affected by 4 or 5 earthquakes each year, usually measuring between 4 and 5 on the Richter scale. Every 25 years or so Albania experiences a larger quake, usually measuring around 9 degrees on the Richter scale. Along with earthquakes, Albania can also experience freak tsunamis in its southern coastal areas. Susceptibility to flood and drought are also concerns.

<http://www.keshilliministrave.al/english/info/english/page15.htm>  
[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561564/Albania.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561564/Albania.html)  
<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/al.html>

## History

Modern day Albanians are believed to be the ethnic descendents of the Illyrians, the earliest known inhabitants of the Balkans, who settled there long before the Greeks, Romans, or Slavs. Scholars believe that the Illyrians arrived in the Balkans around 2000 BC. Greek colonialists established colonies in the region during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BC but these colonies eventually began to dwindle in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. As Greeks were withdrawing, the Illyrian civilization was evolving into a more complex political system including federations and kingdoms that flourished from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.

In 165 BC Illyria was conquered by Rome, becoming the Roman province of Illyricum. Though the Illyrian people remained under Roman control for the next six centuries they resisted the pressure to assimilate to Roman culture and maintained their language as well as other distinctive cultural elements. Even so, many Illyrians gained prominence in Roman society; a few even became emperors including Aurelian (270-275), Diocletian (284-305), and Constantine (306-337). From 165 BC onward Albania was controlled by a steady succession of foreign powers until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. They enjoyed only brief periods of autonomy.

When the Roman Empire split in 395, present-day Albania became part of the Byzantine (eastern) Empire but remained under the religious authority of the Roman (western) pope. They were eventually detached by Pope Leo II in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and placed under the patriarch of Constantinople.

After suffering from terrible invasions by Visigoths, Huns, and Ostrogoths in the 5<sup>th</sup> century the Illyrian territories were overrun by a steady flow of Slavic immigrants from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Many Illyrians in northern regions (modern-day Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Serbia) assimilated into the Slavic culture. The southern Illyrians, however, including those in modern-day Albania, resisted assimilation.

From the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, Illyria gradually became known as Albania. The name Albania is thought to have originated from the *Albanos* peoples that inhabited central Albania. The first recorded reference to Albania was made by Byzantine Emperor Alexius I Comnenus in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

As Byzantine power gradually waned and eventually disappeared (by the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century), the threat of the invading Ottomans was growing. The Ottomans invaded Albania in 1388 and had conquered it by 1430. Albania resisted Ottoman rule for some time, however, led by Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg. From 1443 to 1468 Skanderbeg led a successful resistance movement that continued after his death. Without Skanderbeg's leadership, however, the resistance movement met with more limited success and eventually fell apart in 1478. The Ottomans squashed the last of the Albanian resistance and

completely controlled the country by 1506. Many Albanians fled to Italy at this time. Albania remained an Ottoman territory until 1912.

After gaining control of *almost* all of Albania (Ottoman power was weak in the more remote regions of the Albanian highlands) the Ottomans began their process of *islamicization*. Their goal was to convert as many Albanians to Islam as possible so as to prevent future unrest. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century about two-thirds of Albania's population had converted to Islam.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Balkan states became increasingly dissatisfied with Ottoman rule, desiring autonomy. Albanian political leaders began to push the idea of a free Albania in all Albanian-populated territories. Albanian nationalists formed resistance movements and fought the Ottomans from 1910 to 1912. At the same time the Ottomans were facing attacks from Serb, Greek, and Bulgarian forces and were defeated in 1912 in what was later called the First Balkan War. Soon after that, on November 28, 1912, Albanians declared independence by issuing the Vlore Proclamation. The Great Powers (Britain, Germany, Russia, Austria, France, and Italy) agreed to recognize Albania's independence but, because of strong pressure from Albania's neighbors, they decided to give the Albanian-populated region of Kosovo to Serbia. Greece also received a portion of Albanian land. The result of this reapportionment was that almost half of Albania's population was living outside of Albanian borders. Then, adding insult to injury, the Great Powers appointed a German prince, Wilhelm zu Wied, as King of Albania. Wied was expelled by the people after only six months on the throne. World War I erupted almost immediately following Wied's expulsion, leaving Albania with virtually no political leadership. Austrian, French, Italian, Greek, Montenegrin, and Serb armies occupied Albania during the war. At the Paris Peace Conference after World War I, Britain, France, and Italy proposed that Albania simply be dissolved and partitioned off to its neighbors. U.S. President Wilson vetoed this plan, however, admitting Albania into the League of Nations instead, by which it gained recognition as an independent state.

Political controversy plagued Albania during the 1920s. Conservative landowners and tribal leaders wanted to maintain Albania's status quo while more liberal intellectuals and political leaders, backed by merchants, sought to modernize the country. Eventually the conservative leader Ahmed Bey Zogu was appointed president (1925) and eventually became King Zog I (1928). During Zog's rule he allowed Italy to exercise enormous power over Albania to the point that Albania was almost nothing more than an Italian protectorate.

As the storm of World War II began to brew, Italy invaded Albania in 1939. Zog was forced to leave. Albania never officially entered World War II but Albanian nationalists, monarchists, and Communists fought a partisan war against Italian occupying troops (1939-1943) and later against German ones (1943-1944). After Germany withdrew in 1944, the Communists gained control of the Albanian government under the leadership of Enver Hoxha (secretary general of the Albanian Communist Party). With the support of intellectuals and impoverished peasants, who for centuries had been little more than pawns of wealthy landowners, the Communist party began a period of radical reform. Hoxha's vision was to transform Albania from a backwards agrarian society to an industrial one. His government destroyed the power of landowners, nationalized many private industries, and collectivized agriculture. It did not take long for Albania to become a totally state-controlled socialist society.

While many of these reforms sound positive, in reality Hoxha was a cunning and ruthless leader. Hoxha was a strict Stalinist who did not believe in freedom of expression or thought. Hoxha repressed his people's civil and political rights and placed a total ban on all religious observances. All Christian and Muslim places of worship were closed and Albania was officially declared as the world's first atheist state. International travel for reasons other than business was outlawed. To repress dissent among the people the government randomly conducted purges, where dissidents were subjected to a variety of intimidation tactics. These tactics included public criticism and ridicule, dismissal from their jobs, imprisonment in labor camps, and even execution. Hoxha also achieved almost total isolation for Albania. He was disgusted with many of his Communist allies, accusing them of abandoning the socialist revolution and seeking to form ties with the West. Eventually, despite his close ties to

Stalinism, Hoxha cut all diplomatic ties with the USSR in 1961. Soon, China (who, in Hoxha's eyes had a more pure form of Communism) took the USSR's place as Albania's main ally and trading partner.

Albania maintained its isolationism until the late 1960s. After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, however, Albania sought to renew ties with its European neighbors in an effort to protect itself. Also, as Chinese-United States relations began to heal, Albania's relationship with China became strained, eventually breaking in 1978. After that, Albania began seeking closer economic ties with Europe; politically, however, Albania remained almost totally isolated until the early 1990s.

Hoxha died in 1985 and was succeeded by Ramiz Alia. Alia attempted to follow in Hoxha's footsteps but, all over Eastern Europe, Western pressures on Communist regimes were increasing. After witnessing the overthrow and execution of Nicolae Ceausescu (the communist leader of Romania) in 1989, Alia signed the United Nations Helsinki Agreement that guaranteed some human rights for the people of Albania. Alia also allowed other political parties to participate in the 1992 elections. The new Democratic Party's candidate, Sali Berisha, won the election with 62% of the vote, becoming Albania's first post-communist president.

Berisha instituted economic and democratic reforms but his good intentions never got off the ground due to political gridlock in the mid 1990s. At the same time, unrest was growing over the dishonest business dealings of Albanian investment companies. Thousands of investors all over Albania were left bankrupt and outraged when, in early 1997, several of these pyramid schemes collapsed. (**Pyramid scheme**: a fraudulent scheme in which the perpetrators recruit people to pay money to those above them in a hierarchy on the expectation that they will get payments from those below. When the number of newly recruited people eventually dwindles, the payment structure collapses. Definition taken from [http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary\\_701709045/pyramid\\_scheme.html](http://encarta.msn.com/dictionary_701709045/pyramid_scheme.html).) The government promised to reimburse its citizens but the people of Albania didn't care. By March riots had erupted all over the country. Civilians broke into police stations and military bases, stealing millions of Kalashnikovs and other weapons. Entire cities were in complete upheaval, with local militias or armed citizens forced to defend themselves against looters as local governments collapsed. The national government faced the same threat and it became increasingly clear that international mediation was unavoidable. A UN Multinational Protection Force restored order and an interim national reconciliation government oversaw emergency elections in June 1997. The Socialist party swept the elections, making Rexhep Meidani President of the Republic. A new prime minister, Pandeli Majko (also a Socialist), was appointed in 1998.

Power struggles within the Socialist party resulted in a series of short-lived Socialist governments. During this time, however, Albania's democratic structures were strengthened. A new constitution, guaranteeing the rule of law and the protection of human rights and religious freedom, was ratified in 1998. The fledgling new nation was soon put to the test when war broke out in neighboring Kosovo later that year. Albanian was forced to absorb hundreds of thousands of refugees throughout 1998 and 1999 putting an enormous strain on its economy and forcing Albania to decide what to do with all the refugees, now estimated by the United Nations to have reached over 444,000.

Albania is still struggling to become the nation it wants to be. In recent years corrupt political leaders, allegedly rigged elections, and the constant clash of political parties has made progress difficult. The Socialist party retains a somewhat shaky domination, although Sali Berisha, former president and leader of the Democratic Party, was elected president in 2005, mostly because of bickering in the Socialist party.

<http://www.albanian.com/main/history/>

<http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/students/Maguire/history.html>

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561564/Albania.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561564/Albania.html)

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3235.htm>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albania>

## Christian History

Christianity came to Albania while it was under Roman rule. When the Roman Empire split in 395, Albania aligned itself politically with the eastern (Byzantine) portion of the empire but retained religious ties with Rome. Things remained thus until the final split between eastern and western congregations in 1054 at which time the southern portion of Albania was placed under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Orthodox ecumenical patriarch in Constantinople while northern areas of Albania remained under Roman (Catholic) jurisdiction. Even today the majority of Albania's Orthodox believers live in southern Albania while Catholicism remains mostly concentrated in the north.

When the Ottoman Empire began its conquest of Albania in the 15<sup>th</sup> century they sought not only to dominate it politically but to convert its people to Islam, as well. Catholics in northern Albania strongly resisted Islam at first but eventually they could resist no longer. Forced conversions were not uncommon but most people in that region converted for other reasons. Either they were enticed by the material benefits of conversion or they were simply too ignorant in their faith, most of them being backward and illiterate, to overcome the Ottoman islamization. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Catholics of northern Albania were far outnumbered by Muslims. In southern Albania, thousands of Orthodox Christians fled their homeland and settled in southern Italy. Those who remained faced periods of wide-spread forced conversions that spanned three centuries.

The church managed to survive during the Ottoman period despite widespread attempts at islamization by the Ottomans. Catholics were aided by Franciscan missionaries who began entering Albania in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The Orthodox Church was more accommodating to the Ottomans and in turn the Ottomans were tolerant of the Orthodox Church. The church, both Catholic and Orthodox, faced further challenges when the Communist regime came to power after World War II. Albania's dictator, Emil Hoxha, eventually declared an atheist state, making Albania the first officially atheist country in the world and forcing the church underground.

Since the fall of Communism it has become obvious the Hoxha's achievement of eliminating God from Albanian society was not as successful as it seemed at the time. Now  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the population claims to have a faith in God. The 1998 constitution guaranteed religious liberty for the people of Albania and Protestant churches are experiencing a high growth rate. By 2000 there were 55 evangelical denominations represented in Albania and 130 congregations meeting all over the country. However, the percentage of marginal Christians is increasing at an even higher rate.

[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+a10055\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+a10055))

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01253b.htm>

Operation World, pp 63-66

## Religions

### **Non-Christian**

An estimated 70% of Albanians are Muslim making Albania Europe's only predominantly Islamic country. There are two main Islamic groups represented in Albania.

#### Sunni Muslim (50%)

Over 90% of the world's Muslims are Sunni. The word "sunni" is derived from the Arabic word meaning "tradition," specifically referring to the tradition of the Prophet Mohammed. Before the Ottoman Empire took control of Albania in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries the country was primarily Christian. However, it didn't take long for the people of Albania to fall to the Ottoman Empire's islamization. In less than 200 years over 2/3 of Albania's population has converted to Islam.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam\\_in\\_Albania](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Albania)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunni>  
[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561564\\_3/Albania.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561564_3/Albania.html)

### Bektashi (20%)

Bektashi Muslims are part of the Sufi order of Islam. The Bektashi order was founded in 1256 by Muslim saint Haxhi Bektash Beliu. The Sufi orders of Islam are regarded as more liberal sects, stressing the individual's personal relationship with God and emphasizing the equality of men and women in God's eyes, allowing them to worship together. Bektashis are also known for being interested in Christianity and its traditions and for promoting scientific study, religious tolerance, civic involvement, and democracy.

Pockets of Bektashi Muslims existed all over the Ottoman Empire at the height of its power. As the Empire began to weaken, however, Bektashis began to face persecution, especially in the heart of the Empire. Sultan Mahmud II officially banned Bektahism in 1826, at which time Bektashis were forced to begin practicing underground. Eventually the Bektashi leadership moved their headquarters to Tirana, Albania where they could operate freely. Albania was already a primarily Muslim country by this time and many Albanians were attracted to this different Islamic order.

In Islamic circles members of the Bektashi order are the brunt of common jokes and anecdotes. In these stories the Bektashi acts as a free-thinker who challenges his society by living outside of the confines of traditional Islam.

Other non-Christian religious groups also practice in Albania but their numbers are very small:

Judaism: A very, very small Jewish community continues to live in Albania, thanks to the refusal of the Albanian government to turn over its Jewish community to the Germans during their occupation in World War II. The Jewish population of Albania is estimated to be between 300 and 500.

Baha'i: Baha'i missionaries entered Albania in the early 1990s following the fall of Communism. They have had some success, claiming an estimated 5,700 adherents.

Mormons: Mormon missionaries have had a presence in Albania since the fall of Communism. They have distributed large quantities of literature and have received some positive response to their efforts.

Jehovah's Witnesses: Jehovah's Witnesses also sent missionaries to Albania in the early 1990s. Their information-spreading tactics have met with limited success.

<http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/rel-bakt.html>  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bektashi>  
<http://pluralism.org/research/profiles/display.php?profile=71774>  
World Christian Encyclopedia, pp. 51-54

### **Christian Cults/Sects**

No known groups exist

### **Catholic/Orthodox Churches**

Roman Catholic Church: An estimated 10% of Albania's population is Roman Catholic. Most of these live in the northern (Gheg) region of Albania. The Roman Catholic Church suffered greatly during Communism. By the spring of 1971 only 12 Catholic priests remained in Albania after a wave of executions and imprisonments that led to death. The Church continued to function underground and came to life again after the fall of Communism. Growth has been slow, however. There are currently fewer than 50 Catholic priests in Albania, compared to 300 in 1944.

Eastern Orthodox Church: Approximately 20% of Albanians are members of the Orthodox Church. There are few, if any, Orthodox believers in the north, historically being concentrated in southern Albania among the Tosks. The Orthodox Church was allowed to function during Communism but it was almost completely controlled by the Communist regime.

#### **Protestant/Evangelicals/Pentecostals:**

Seventh Day Adventists, Methodists, and Baptists all had a missionary presence in Albania before the Italian/German occupations of World War II. Evangelical missions organizations have returned to Albania since the fall of Communism; within 18 months of the fall of Communism, 16 Evangelical groups had already entered the county. By the mid 1990s there were some 400 evangelical missionaries serving in Albania. By 1992, after only a brief time of religious freedom in Albania, there were 1,000 known Albanian Evangelicals and 36 new congregations.

World Christian Encyclopedia, pp. 51-54

### **People Groups**

**704**

#### **Tosk (1,664,967)**

Albania has two native ethnic groups, Albanian Tosks and Albanian Ghegs. Tosks inhabit the southern part of Albania (south of the Shkumbin River). The two groups are distinguished from each other by which Albanian dialect they speak. The Tosk are known to be a friendly, lively and talkative people. Tosks are overwhelmingly Muslim, enjoying the resurgence of religious practice that emerged after the fall of Communism. Less than 2% of the Tosk population is evangelical, although there have been some localized church planting efforts in the past few years. A complete Bible translation is available, as are multiple evangelical resources. There are currently several evangelical missions agencies working in Albania and some small clusters of evangelical churches are beginning to emerge.

**39313**

#### **Gheg (1,369,241)**

Albania's other native ethnic group, the Albanian Ghegs, live in the northern half of Albania (north of the Shkumbin River). Their dialect is slightly different from the dialect of the Tosks. Also, in contrast to the Tosks' lively nature, Ghegs are stern and serious. The majority of Ghegs are Muslim although many profess to be Roman Catholic. Their commitment to the Church is nominal at best, however. Less than 2% of Albanian Ghegs are evangelical but there have been some church planting efforts among them in recent years. A complete Bible translation is available and there are many evangelistic resources available in the Gheg dialect.

**39292**

#### **Greek (160,820)**

Greeks living in Albania still maintain their strong connection to the Greek Orthodox Church. There are few, if any, Greek believers living in Albania. It is safe to assume that less than 2% of the population is evangelical. There have been no known church planting efforts among this group.

**702**

#### **Roma/Gypsy (96,492)**

There is a large Roma population in Albania. Gypsies have no organized religion; they could best be described as superstitious animists. There are no known Roma believers in Albania.

**39301**

#### **Vlach (53,607)**

The Vlach people are a Balkan people that inhabit many countries in south Europe. Ethnically, Vlachs are the ancestors of modern day Romanians. Their primary religion is Islam. Less than 1% of the

population is evangelical and there have been no church planting efforts among this population in recent years but there are some evangelical resources available.

### **39302**

#### **Macedonian (21,442)**

Macedonians, including Macedonians living in Albania, are primarily Eastern Orthodox. Less than 2% of Macedonians living in Albania are evangelical. There are some evangelical resources available but no church planting efforts have been undertaken among this group.

### **00000**

#### **Serb (296,000)**

The Serbian population of Albania is concentrated in the southwestern region of the country. Serbians are largely Eastern Orthodox but many of them now claim to be nonreligious. Less than 2% of the population is evangelical.

### **00000**

#### **Armini/Aromanian (approx. 150,000)**

The Armini people live throughout the southern Balkan states. They are the ethnic descendents of Vlachs. They speak Aromanian, a Romance language so similar to Romanian that it is often not recognized as a separate language but merely a Romanian dialect. An overwhelming majority of the Armini are Eastern Orthodox. Less than 1% of the population is evangelical. A complete Bible translation is not available in Aromanian but there are multiple missions organizations engaging this people group.

### **00000**

#### **Montenegrin (11,000)**

The Montenegrin population of Albania is concentrated in two or three towns in southwestern Albania. Montenegrins are primarily Eastern Orthodox in religious practice but a growing number of them claim to be nonreligious. There some Montenegrin believers in Albania but their numbers make up less than 2% of the population.

### **00000**

#### **Deaf (5,700)**

The Joshua Project ([www.joshuaproject.org](http://www.joshuaproject.org)) ranks the deaf of Albania among their least-reached peoples. The Gospel is currently inaccessible to deaf Albanians. No missions organizations are working among this people and there are very few, if any evangelical resources available to them. As are most deaf individuals living in Europe, the deaf of Albania are illiterate because no one has taken the time to teach them to read or write.

### **00000**

#### **Jew/Israeli (500)**

There are few, if any, known Jewish Christians living in Albania and there are no missionary agencies committed to reaching them. Complete Bible translations and many evangelical resources are available in contemporary Hebrew.

### **00000**

#### **Han Chinese/Mandarin (200)**

The Han Chinese, although scattered across the globe, have retained their traditional Chinese religion. This religion usually consists of a mixture of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and superstitions. The status of evangelicals among the Han Chinese living in Albania is unknown.

[www.peoplegroups.org](http://www.peoplegroups.org)

[www.joshuaproject.org](http://www.joshuaproject.org)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aromanian>



## Missiological Implications

Albania is one of very few Muslim countries that allow Christianity to exist freely alongside Islam. While the majority of Albanians do claim to be Muslim, the number of Muslims actually seems to be declining in Albania. Protestant/evangelical churches are experiencing success that is uncommon for this part of the world.

While only present in small numbers, there are multiple minority groups living in Albania who also need to hear the gospel. Many of them may only be in Albania for a short time. The time that they spend in Albania could be very strategic; if believers could catch a vision for evangelizing these minority groups and teaching new believers how to plant churches, the positive effects could be felt all over this region of the world.

There are many humanitarian needs in Albania. Many times missionaries experience greater success when they are willing to meet physical needs as well as spiritual.

In general, Albanians are a simple people. Most of them do not have advanced education and they work simple jobs and lead simple lives. Evangelical presentations should be geared appropriately.

## Pictures

Photo "Berat" by Joonas Lytinen (photographer must be acknowledged)

## Links

<http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/students/Maguire/alb1.html>

(Website of Peace Corps volunteers who were in/evacuated from Albania during the civil war of 1997.)

<http://www.balkanpeace.org/hed/archive/may02/hed4965.shtml>

[www.peoplegroups.org](http://www.peoplegroups.org)

[www.joshuaproject.org](http://www.joshuaproject.org)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aromanian>

<http://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/rel-bakt.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bektashi>

<http://pluralism.org/research/profiles/display.php?profile=71774>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam\\_in\\_Albania](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Albania)

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sunni>

[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+a10055\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+a10055))

<http://www.albanian.com/main/history/>

<http://iml.jou.ufl.edu/projects/students/Maguire/history.html>

[http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia\\_761561564/Albania.html](http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761561564/Albania.html)

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3235.htm>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albania>

<http://www.seda.org.al/NHDR/CH3.pdf>

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/al.html>

[http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albanian\\_proverbs](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albanian_proverbs)

[http://www.gendercide.org/case\\_honour.html](http://www.gendercide.org/case_honour.html)

<http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4273020.stm>

<http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4062429.stm>

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01253b.htm>