

Albania: Nano Bid to Silence Press

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Socialist government employs financial police to counter hostile reporting.

The left-wing government of Prime Minister Fatos Nano is ratcheting up pressure against the independent media, harassing them with regular financial inspections.

The government last month sent the police in to check the accounts of the independent daily, Koha Jone, and the Gjeli Vizion television station. Both had angered the government by criticising the premier and his wife.

Though within the law, the timing and political backdrop to the police inspections have raised strong suspicions that they are being employed to intimidate the media.

The raid on the newspaper, officially to check its accounts, took place after it attacked what it described as the premier's abuse of power. The title said the motives for the financial audit were purely political. "It was done under the direction of Fatos Nano to silence us," Koha Jone said.

Artus Cani, director of Gjeli Vizion, said the station had annoyed the authorities for a critical report on the life led by premier's wife in Greece before she met her husband. Cani insisted the station would continue to produce investigative reports on controversial issues.

The storm was all the more surprising, as the socialist government had hitherto enjoyed a honeymoon with the media.

But the authorities seem increasingly inclined to take revenge on what they view as hostile reporting by ordering aggressive financial inspections of newspapers and television stations.

This does not mean a return to the days of the right-wing Democratic Party, whose violent intimidation of the media included its henchmen beating up and openly threatening journalists.

The tactics are different these days. When the government is displeased with a journalist, he or she will simply be removed from their post, whether or not they are working in a media outlet that is nominally independent.

Early in October, Arban Hasani, editor of TeleArberia national TV, was sacked as a penalty for the way the station had reported unfavourably on the government's efforts to cope with the September floods. Weeks later, Enton Abilekaj, of TeleNorba Shqiptare TV, was dismissed for similar reasons.

While the rest of the Albanian media seem reluctant to cover this growing censorship, foreign organisations, such as the pressure group Human Rights Watch, have urged the European Union to include the issue of press freedom in its association talks with Albania.

Elizabeth Andersen, of HRW's Europe and Central Asia unit, said the situation was serious. "Financial pressure and other subtle forms of government interference have become commonplace, posing a serious threat to media freedom," she said.

But the government shows no sign of backing down in its confrontational stance with the media. The finance ministry has said it will continue to make financial audits, while at a party meeting in the south-eastern town of Korçe, Nano accused the media of receiving dirty money from the mafia. "Media groups funded by the crime world are trying to divide the Socialist Party and become an obstacle to reforms," he said.

Since taking up the premier's post for the third time last July, Nano has instituted a tougher approach to reporters, telling government ministers not to allow their staff to speak to the media.

In addition, the authorities have chosen to only advertise with supportive press organisations. And private businesses are increasingly fearful of advertising in anti-government media groups lest they incur the risk of financial inspections.

As a result of this pressure, most of the print and electronic media have become openly pro-government and pro-Socialist in their reporting. Prec Zogaj, a centre-right parliamentarian, says the authorities now own a "controlling stake" in the Albanian media.

There is not much likelihood of the domestic press raising an alarm over the issue of press freedom at the moment. Media owners do not want to jeopardise the future of their publications or TV and radio stations by attacking the government. But if they remain silent, they risk severely compromising their reputation.

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