



By: *Sharmila Devi*

Albania's 'renaissance man' Rama under protest pressure



Edi Rama is not worrying, in public at least, about being ousted by the **protests** that erupted more than three weeks ago against alleged corruption during his four consecutive terms as prime minister since 2013.

But the demonstrations may complicate Albania's long-standing bid to join the EU, which has already expressed disapproval of Tirana's fiddling with its legal framework.

In describing his country's zeal to join the European bloc, Rama recently likened Albania to the "EU Taliban".

He is also not above using expletives to dismiss the protestors calling on him to resign and face prosecution over allowing real estate investors to build luxury beach resorts in and near a nature reserve, leading to the protests being dubbed the "flamingo revolution".

"I tell them fuck you. That simple," he told the FT this week. "It's not for me to prove I'm not the **Godfather**, it's for them to prove I'm the Godfather."

The involvement of President Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka and her husband Jared Kushner in the real estate projects has meant that Albania has even been drawn into a US social media war involving left and right-wingers, many of whom would likely struggle to pin Albania on a map.

The demonstrations started on 31 May when bulldozers started to clear land near the Pishë Poro-Narta reserve, whose lagoon is home to flamingoes and many other animals. Kushner has interests in a resort here and also in one on the nearby island of Sazan.

Ivanka Trump spoke in a podcast of "this beautiful peninsula with a lagoon on one side, the ocean on the other" and said the property plans are "massive in scale".

Cue nightly protests outside Rama's prime ministerial office, with diaspora Albanians returning from the US and Europe to join them. Some have called the development a "new Epstein island", referring to Little St

James in the Caribbean owned by Jeffrey Epstein, who died in New York custody in 2019 awaiting trial on federal sex trafficking charges.

Rama insists that Kushner's project is being examined under EU standards under an environmental impact assessment and that many Albanians support the development.

Rejecting the global oligarchy

But Rama's position was not helped when in early June, Albania's Special Anti-Corruption and Organised Crime Structure (SPAK) launched a major operation targeting an alleged international **drug trafficking and money laundering** network.

Albanian prosecutors say criminal proceeds were channelled into sectors including real estate, construction and hospitality, with assets worth an estimated €150 million seized.

Albania has also issued arrest warrants for more than a dozen businessmen for drug trafficking and money laundering, including one who had previously owned land in the area to be developed by Kushner.

Artur Shehu, an Albanian living in Miami, is accused by SPAK of buying land and using Albanian construction projects to launder money for drug traffickers.

He has denied the accusations and said he arranged to sell the land to Kushner and investors through an unnamed intermediary.

Rama has repeatedly accused Tehran of backing the protests in Albania

Meanwhile, Americans are cheering on the Albanian protesters, with Senator Bernie Sanders saying on X they were rejecting the "global oligarchy".

Alex Jones, the right-wing conspiracy theorist,

said the **protesters** were trying to take back their land “from Israel, Kushner, the Rothschilds and Ivanka Trump,” the New York Times reported.

Rama has repeatedly accused Tehran of backing the protests in Albania, which hosts the heavily fortified headquarters of the People's Mujahedin Organisation of Iran opposition group, which relocated from Iraq in 2013.

Coincidentally, Eric Adams, mayor of New York until 2025, obtained Albanian citizenship and registered as a resident of Tirana in April. He had faced a federal corruption case until its dismissal by the Trump administration.

The 2024 indictment accused him of doing political favours for Turkish government operatives in exchange for bribes.

Surrealism surrounding Albania

Adding to the surrealism surrounding Albania is the criticism of Rama's many other interests, including his role as an artist. He was forced to explain that he financed a trip as a private citizen to Switzerland, where the Art Basel exhibition is showing one of his works, a bronze sculpture.

“He often makes his drawings and doodles on official government papers, calendars, and printed-out emails,” according to the exhibition information.



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Political, as opposed to art, critics have taken note.

“At times, Rama appears less interested in being a prime minister than in becoming a historical figure. He is a politician, painter, author, architect's patron, tie designer, public intellectual, and cultural curator rolled into one carefully constructed personality,” wrote Albanian author Fron Nahzi. “He does not merely govern Albania. He performs Albania.”

Last week, the **European Parliament** voted to back the protestors and urged the government to halt the development projects linked to Kushner. Brussels also continues to demand that Tirana repeal a law allowing strategic investors to accelerate similar development.

For now, the Albanian protestors remain unorganised and seem less of a political threat than similar opposition groupings in Serbia and Bulgaria. But Rama needs to show progress on legal reforms if Brussels is to accept Albania's membership bid.

SPAK's recent operations are meant to show the country is serious. It remains for Brussels to decide if it is.