

ALBANIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and religion and states that everyone is free to choose or to change religion or beliefs. The government approved a law allowing religious communities to build and manage their own religious cemeteries. The government made little progress in addressing claims from religious groups for the return or restitution of property seized during the former communist era, and many of the property claims remained unresolved. Property ownership disputes made it difficult for some religious groups to acquire new land on which to build places of worship.

Through the Interreligious Council of Albania, leaders of the Sunni Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Bektashi communities discussed common concerns and issued joint public statements on a variety of issues affecting religious communities.

U.S. embassy officials continued to urge the government to address religious property claims and return to religious groups the buildings, land, and other property confiscated during the communist era. Through a civic education program, embassy officers visited Islamic, Catholic, and Orthodox religious schools, public high schools, and other educational institutions to promote religious freedom and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3 million (July 2014 estimate). Nearly 20 percent of respondents declined to answer the optional question about religious affiliation in the most recent census in 2011. According to that census, Sunni Muslims constitute nearly 57 percent of the population, Roman Catholics 10 percent, Orthodox Christians (the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania) nearly 7 percent, and Bektashi (a form of Shia Sufism) 2 percent. Other groups present include various Protestant denominations, as well as Bahais, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and a small Jewish community. The State Committee on Cults reports approximately 230 religious groups, organizations, foundations, and educational institutions operating in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

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Legal Framework

The constitution states there is no official religion, and all religions are equal. The constitution guarantees freedom of religion and states everyone is free to choose or to change his or her religion or beliefs, and to express them individually or collectively, in public or private life. The constitution also states no one may be compelled or prohibited to take part in a religious community or its practices or to make his or her beliefs or faith public.

By law, the Office of the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination receives and processes discrimination complaints, including those concerning religious practice. The law specifies the State Committee on Cults, under the jurisdiction of the office of the prime minister, regulates relations between the government and religious groups, protects freedom of religion, and promotes interfaith cooperation and understanding. The law also directs the committee to maintain records and statistics on foreign religious groups that solicit its assistance, and assist foreign employees of religious groups in obtaining residence permits.

The government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups. Any religious group may acquire official status by registering with the Tirana District Court as a nonprofit association. The registration process entails submission of information on the form and scope of the organization, the objectives of its activity, the identities of the organization's founders and legal representatives, management structures and their manner of operation, an address at which the organization can be reached, and payment of a 1,000 lek (\$9) fee to the Tirana District Court. A judge is randomly assigned within 3-4 days of the submission of an application and the process usually concludes within one session. Registration grants religious groups the right to hold bank accounts, own property, and receive some degree of tax-exempt status.

The constitution calls for separate bilateral agreements to regulate relations between the government and religious groups. The government has such agreements with the Roman Catholic Church; the Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities; and the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania (VUSH), a Protestant umbrella organization. Depending upon the religious group involved, a bilateral agreement may confer official recognition, prioritized property restitution, direct financial support from the government, and/or tax exemptions.

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In July the government approved a law allowing religious communities to build and manage religious cemeteries on land that the communities own.

According to law, public schools are secular and the law prohibits religious instruction in them. According to official figures, religious groups, organizations, and foundations have 125 affiliated associations and foundations managing 103 educational institutions. By law, the Ministry of Education and Sport must license these schools, and non-religious curricula must comply with national education standards. Catholic and Muslim groups operate numerous state-licensed schools. The Orthodox Church operates licensed religious schools and a university.

Government Practices

The government increased financial support in the budget for the Catholic, Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities. Although the government had conferred official recognition to the VUSH through a bilateral agreement in 2011, it did not amend the original law providing for financial support to these groups to include the VUSH or draft a separate law, and continued not to provide financial support to the organization. In October the VUSH sent a formal letter requesting the government amend the law or issue a separate law, and the government continued consideration of these options.

Although there was no legal prohibition against wearing religious clothing or symbols, school principals maintained the right to set standards for “appropriate clothing,” which in some instances included restrictions on public displays of religious symbols. In September a 16-year-old Muslim girl submitted a report to the anti-discrimination commissioner stating she was denied the right to attend public school by the school’s principal after the girl started wearing a headscarf. At year’s end, the commissioner was examining the case and had requested a response from the Ministry of Education.

During the year, three additional complaints of discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation were made to the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination. In one case, involving an allegation by a female employee of the postal service that she had been dismissed from her job because she regularly took time from her job to pray at a mosque, the commissioner ruled the employee’s dismissal had not been based on her religious beliefs, but on deficiencies in her job performance. The commissioner dismissed the second case, involving a professor’s allegation he was banned from teaching because of his religious

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beliefs, because it had been filed after the statute of limitations had expired. The third case, involving a prosecutor's complaint he had been transferred from the District Prosecutor's Office of Dibra because of his religious beliefs, remained under investigation.

The government continued to address both preexisting and new claims from religious groups regarding the return or restitution of property seized during the former communist era; however, many property claims remained unresolved. The State Agency for the Restitution and Compensation of Property was required by law to give priority to properties owned by religious groups, but religious groups reported progress was slow. In some cases, the government provided land grants in lieu of property restitution. Administrative and legal challenges related to ownership claims made property restitution difficult for individuals and organizations, including religious groups. During the year the government completed the return of four properties to the Orthodox Church through the restitution process. The government also restored one property to the Catholic Church, and compensated the Muslim community in Shkoder for one property. Hundreds of other claims by religious communities remained unresolved. The Orthodox Church reported they had claims involving 890 buildings and properties still pending with the government, including more than 50 church properties converted to military installations.

During the year, negotiations continued to resolve a 2013 case in which private bailiffs hired by the city of Permet forcibly removed several Orthodox clergy members and religious artifacts from a disputed property.

Some religious groups said disputes over property ownership and problems in tracking or registering land ownership had made it difficult to acquire new land on which to build places of worship. VUSH members rented existing buildings, but reported difficulties acquiring land and constructing their own buildings impeded their ability to hold religious services.

In November the government granted the Albanian Islamic Community (AIC) a permit to construct a new central mosque on land in Tirana being returned to the AIC through the restitution process.

The government pledged to finance the completion of a central place of worship for the Bektashi community, construction of which had been delayed for financial

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reasons. In October the government began disbursing these funds to the Bektashi community.

Several religious leaders continued to challenge the results of the 2011 census, stating census officials never visited a large number of their followers and confusion regarding the consequences of ethnic and religious self-identification may have led many respondents not to identify their religious affiliation. Ethnic Greek minority groups had encouraged their members to boycott the census, affecting measurements of the Greek ethnic minority and membership in the Greek Orthodox Church. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches and Bektashi representatives all maintained their numbers were underrepresented in the official census. These groups felt undercounting their adherents portrayed an inaccurate picture of the religious demographics of the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are closely linked in some cases, it is difficult to categorize some incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Archbishop Anastasios, the head of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Tirana, Durres and all Albania, faced some societal criticism directed at his Greek origin and nationality. In April, for example, the former director of the Albanian State Intelligence Service, Fatos Klosi, publicly opposed what he said was the influence of the Greek Orthodox Church, in the person of Archbishop Anastasios, on the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church. He stated the government should be more careful with the “Greek” Church than with “Islamists.”

Through the Interreligious Council of Albania, leaders of the Sunni Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Bektashi communities discussed common concerns and issued joint public statements on a variety of issues, including a widely-publicized press release in August condemning the terrorist activities of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Religious leaders frequently attended the celebrations of other religious communities as a sign of respect. In September the heads of the five major religious communities participated in the Mass held by Pope Francis and met with him during his visit to Tirana.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials continued to urge the government to address religious property claims and return to religious groups the buildings, land, and other

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property confiscated during the communist era. The Ambassador and other embassy officials frequently engaged religious leaders and community members, particularly from the Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant communities, in events such as the annual embassy-hosted interfaith iftar, where the Ambassador emphasized the value of religious tolerance. U.S. officials visited churches, mosques, and religious sites throughout the year to engage with communities during local religious holidays, and to discuss religious tolerance and challenges the communities faced.

Through a civic education program, embassy officers visited Islamic, Catholic, and Orthodox religious schools, public high schools, and other educational institutions to promote religious freedom and tolerance. Students and teachers worked with members of other religious groups and schools in the community to perform joint service projects and present research on themes of common value across religions.

To publicize the importance of community engagement in promoting religious tolerance, the embassy organized a ceremony in September to honor Muslim and Catholic residents of the village of Malbardhe for their cooperation in constructing a new church for the Catholic community after its only historical place of worship fell into ruin.

In July the embassy organized and funded the travel of Baba Edmond Brahimaj (“Baba Mondj”), the head of the global Bektashi order of Sufism, to meet with senior U.S. State Department officials to discuss issues of religious freedom affecting Bektashis worldwide, including their freedom to worship, and violence directed against them.

In January on Holocaust Remembrance Day, the embassy organized an interfaith discussion between students and representatives from the Muslim and Catholic communities on the importance of tolerance in light of the Holocaust.