

ALBANIA

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 11,100 square miles, and a population of approximately 3.6 million. It had a largely homogeneous ethnic population, consisting of Ghegs in the north and Tosks in the south. The ethnic Greek communities, the largest minority group in the country, were located in the south. Other minorities included the Roma, the Egyptian community (an ethnic group similar to the Roma that does not speak the Roma language), Vlachs, and Macedonians.

The majority of citizens were secular in orientation after decades of rigidly enforced atheism under the communist regime, which ended in 1990. No reliable data were available on active participation in formal religious services, but estimates ranged from 25 to 40 percent. Despite such secularism, most citizens associated themselves with a traditional religious group. Citizens of Muslim background made up the largest traditional religious group (estimated at 65 to 70 percent of the population) and were divided into two major communities: those associated with a moderate form of Sunni Islam and those associated with the Bektashi school (a particularly liberal form of Shi'a Sufism). Bektashis were estimated to represent approximately one-quarter of the country's Muslim population. In 1925, after the revolution of Ataturk and the Bektashis' expulsion from Turkey, the country became the world center of Bektashism, although it has not been recognized as such by the Government. In 2005, the Muslim community, historically known as the Albanian Muslim Community, resumed using the name "Albanian Islamic Community."

The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania (referred to as Orthodox) and the Roman Catholic Church were the other large denominations. An estimated 20 to 25 percent of the population belonged to communities that are traditionally Albanian Orthodox and approximately 10 percent to the Roman Catholic communities. The Orthodox Church became independent from Constantinople's authority in 1929 but was not recognized as autocephalous (independent) until 1937.

Muslims were found throughout the country but were concentrated mostly in the middle of the country and to a lesser extent in the south. The Orthodox lived mainly in the south and Roman Catholics in the north of the country; this division was not strict, however, particularly in the case of many urban centers, which had mixed populations. The Greek minority, concentrated in the south, belonged almost exclusively to the Orthodox Church. In addition to the four traditional religious groups, the country had substantial numbers of Protestants, Baha'is, members of Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and other smaller religions. All reported that they freely carried out their religious activities.

According to the State Committee on Cults, during the period covered by this report, there were a total of 245 religious groups, organizations, and foundations other than the 4 traditional faiths active in the country. This number included 34 different Islamic organizations and 189 Protestant (Christian) organizations. The largest foreign missionary groups were American, Western European, and Middle Eastern.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. According to the 1998 Constitution, there is no official religion and all religions are equal; however, the predominant religious communities (Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic) enjoy a greater degree of official recognition (e.g., national holidays) and social status based on their historical presence in the country. All registered religious groups have the right to hold bank accounts and to own property and buildings. Official holidays include religious holy days from all four predominant faiths. Religious movements may acquire the official status of a juridical person by registering with the Tirana District Court under the Law on Nonprofit Organizations, which recognizes the status of a nonprofit association regardless of whether the organization has a cultural, recreational, religious, or humanitarian character. The Government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups; however, the State Committee on Cults maintains records and statistics on foreign religious organizations that contact it for assistance. No groups reported difficulties registering during the period covered by this report. All religious communities have criticized the Government for its unwillingness to grant them tax-exempt status. Since 2003, foreign religious missionaries have been exempted from the residence permit tax.

The State Committee on Cults is charged with regulating the relations between the Government and all religious communities, large and small. Following parliamentary elections in July 2005, a new government came to power in September 2005. In the previous government the chairman of the Cults Committee had the status of a deputy minister and reported directly to the prime minister. In the current government, the Cults

Committee has been moved within the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth and Sports. The Cults Committee recognizes the equality of religious communities and respects their independence. The Cults Committee is charged with working to protect freedom of religion and to promote inter-religious cooperation and understanding. The Cults Committee claims that its records on religious organizations facilitate the granting of residence permits by police to foreign employees of various religious organizations. No organization claimed any difficulty in obtaining residency permits during the period covered by this report. However, as a general rule, foreign religious missionaries were issued only one-year residency permits and not five-year permits, as allowed under law for residents who have been in the country more than two years. The new government promised to issue longer period permits but had not yet begun to do so. No single religious organization has been singled out; all have been treated equally. In 2004, the State Committee on Cults assisted 1,084 foreign missionaries in obtaining residency permits.

There is no law or regulation forcing religious organizations to notify the Cults Committee of their activities; however, Article 10 of the constitution calls for separate bilateral agreements to regulate relations between the Government and religious communities. At the end of the period covered by this report, only the Roman Catholic Church has finalized such an agreement with the Government; this agreement entered into force in March 2005. The State Committee on Cults had a clear mandate to negotiate agreements with the three remaining groups by the end of August 2006 and convened a working group in late May for this purpose. The Albanian Evangelical Alliance (VUSH), a Protestant umbrella organization, approached the Cults Committee and also asked to negotiate a bilateral agreement, but had not received a response to its request by the end of the period covered by this report.

Additionally, the State Committee on Cults drafted a law on religion to deal with all religious communities according to a common standard; however, no action had been taken on the draft by the end of the period covered by this report.

According to official figures, religious communities, organizations and foundations managed 101 educational institutions, out of which 15 were officially religious-affiliated schools, with more than 2,600 students. Under law, the Ministry of Education must license such schools, and the curricula must comply with national education standards. Both the Roman Catholic and Muslim groups operated numerous state-licensed schools and have reported no problems in obtaining new licenses for new schools. During the reporting period, VUSH reported that it was unable to obtain the necessary licenses, despite guarantees that they would teach the state curricula and employ only state-accredited instructors. The Orthodox Church and the Bektashis operate only strictly religious educational centers for the training of clerics.

The Orthodox Church's 1954 statute states that its archbishop must have Albanian citizenship; however, the archbishop during the reporting period was a Greek citizen who was still seeking Albanian citizenship. The Government had not taken action on his citizenship application by the end of the period covered by this report.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Government is secular. The Ministry of Education states that public schools in the country are secular and that the law prohibits ideological and religious indoctrination. Religion is not taught in public schools. No restriction is imposed on families regarding the way they raise their children with respect to religious practices.

In 1967, the former communist government banned all religious practices and expropriated the property of the established Islamic, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and other churches. The Government has not returned all the properties and religious objects under its control that were confiscated during the communist regime. Property restitution remained one of the greatest challenges facing the religious communities. All four major traditional communities had substantial property claims that remained unresolved. In cases in which religious buildings were returned, the Government often failed to return the land that surrounds the buildings, sometimes because of redevelopment claims by private individuals who began farming it or using it for other purposes.

In July 2004, Parliament approved a law on the restitution and compensation of properties confiscated during the communist regime. According to this law, religious communities have the same rights as private individuals in matters of property restitution or compensation. However, the religious communities question the law's limitation on property restitution to 150 acres. The Cults Committee recently announced that the new government intended to establish a fund for monetary compensation. Moreover, the Government announced plans to remove bureaucratic and legalistic hurdles that have hindered the return of confiscated properties. Specifically, the Government will no longer require that religious organizations produce titles and deeds proving original ownership before making restitution.

The Orthodox Church began construction of a new cathedral on a parcel of land that it was given as compensation for other land seized by the communist government. Despite this progress, the Orthodox Church claimed a lack of action on a number of other property claims throughout the country, as well as difficulty in recovering some religious icons and precious manuscripts. Additionally, both the Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church were still trying to regain possession of their archives that were seized by the communist government and continued to be held in the national archives.

Although the Roman Catholic Church had substantial outstanding property claims, it indicated that it was not actively pursuing these and had decided to focus its efforts in other areas. Nevertheless, if compensation is eventually paid out it expects to receive compensation as well. The Islamic Community and the Bektashis also requested that the Government return a number of properties. The Islamic Community succeeded in obtaining the title to a large parcel of land located across from the parliament building in the center of Tirana on which a mosque once stood. However, it was not issued the necessary building permit to allow construction of a new mosque. Under the new Urban

Regulatory Plan for Tirana, another parcel of land in central Tirana, also owned by the Islamic Community, has been set aside for this purpose. The Islamic Community has rejected this location, however, in favor of the other site. The Bektashi community is also seeking compensation from the Government for victims of religious maltreatment during the communist regime.

Over the reporting period, VUSH has continued its efforts to expand its relationship with the country's various public institutions, including the Cults Committee, state-controlled media, and universities.

Media coverage of the Jehovah's Witnesses improved since the previous reporting period, during which the organization was the subject of false media accounts of youth members committing suicide. Over the reporting period there was only one such article published. The organization reported that in this instance the Government acted cooperatively and responsibly in helping to quell false rumors. The organization reported that they have faced no other hindrance in their ability to carry out their programs in the country.

There were approximately six hundred Jews in the country before World War II. During the war, many Jews from other countries found shelter in the country, but almost all remaining Jews immigrated to Israel after 1991. There were believed to be fewer than one hundred Jews left in the country, and there were no reports of synagogues or Jewish community centers functioning in the country. The Archaeology Institute of the Albanian Academy of Sciences, together with archaeologists from the Hebrew University Institute of Archaeology, was excavating an ancient synagogue in the southern city of Saranda during the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Society is largely secular. Inter-marriage among members of different religions is extremely common. Citizens take pride in the tolerance and understanding that prevail among them.

In contrast to past years, representatives of the Orthodox Church reported that there were no acts of vandalism carried out against its churches or property. The Catholic Church, however, reported that there were two cases in which public crosses were destroyed, both in the Shkodra region. That city was also the location of a controversy regarding the public placement of a statue of Mother Theresa (an ethnic Albanian born in Macedonia).

A leader of the Islamic community of Shkodra initially objected, claiming that Mother Theresa was a Catholic figure and therefore her statue should not be placed on public property. The national leadership of the Albanian Islamic Community, however, announced that it supported erection of the statue on the ground that Mother Theresa was a national figure. Ultimately the Shkodra Islamic community rescinded its objections, stating that it, too, recognized that Mother Theresa was a national symbol.

The investigation into the 2003 killing of Sali Tivari, the former General Secretary of the Islamic Community, remained open at the end of the reporting period.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. government has employed numerous initiatives to further religious freedom and tolerance. The U.S. Embassy continues to urge the Government to address outstanding religious property claims and to return buildings, land, and other property to the denominations that lost them under communist rule. Embassy officers, including the chief of mission, meet frequently (both in formal office calls and at representational events) with the heads of the major religious communities in the country.

The embassy has been active in urging tolerance and moderation as a continued hallmark of society. The embassy has provided grants to local organizations to promote interfaith tolerance and understanding and to support the teaching of civic affairs and religious tolerance in secondary schools, including schools operated by faith-based organizations. The embassy has also sponsored events at its American Corners geared towards high school and university students to promote interfaith understanding, including a photo exhibit and discussion on "Muslim Life in America." The embassy supported other projects that support and strengthen civic education in religious-affiliated schools to help ensure that tradition is preserved as new forms of religious practice appear in the country.

During the reporting period, using an embassy grant, the Civic and Faith-based Education Project expanded its activities throughout the country, bringing together local authorities, teachers, students, religious leaders, and civil society representatives to discuss ways of cultivating values that can contribute to a more democratic, diverse and tolerant society.

The project also extended cooperation with the Education Department of the Albanian Islamic Community, which, as a result, introduced constructive, cooperative civic education curricula into Muslim-affiliated schools in Tirana. The project replicated this experience in other Muslim-affiliated schools throughout the country.

This project also provided in-service training for teachers in faith-based nonpublic schools, which have agreed to teach civic education. The training offered knowledge and skills for effective civic education in their schools, which could help to further strengthen the relations between civic and faith-based education, provide students in such schools

with civic knowledge and skills, and also improve the climate for further cooperation between public schools and faith-based nonpublic schools.

Through a USAID project entitled "Fostering Religious Harmony in Albania," the U.S. government supported the peaceful coexistence of different religious groups and fostered greater understanding among persons of different faiths. This project seeks to establish dialogue and cooperation among members of the different religions present in the country at all levels of the organizations.