

ALBANIA

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects 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 religions 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 a total area of 11,100 square miles, and its population is approximately 3,144,058. It has 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, are located in the south. Other small minorities include 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 are secular in orientation after decades of rigidly enforced atheism under the Communist regime, which ended in 1990. Despite such secularism, most citizens traditionally associate themselves with a religious group. Citizens of Muslim background make up the largest traditional religious group (estimated at 65 to 70 percent of the population) and are divided into two 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). Recently, the Muslim community, known as the Albanian Muslim Community, resumed using its historical name of the Albanian Islamic Community. In 1925, after the revolution of Ataturk and the Bektashi's expulsion from Turkey, the country became the world center of Bektashism, although it has not been recognized as such by the Government. Bektashis are estimated to represent approximately one quarter of the country's Muslim population.

The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania (referred to as Orthodox) and the Roman Catholic Church are the other large denominations. An estimated 20 to 25 percent of the population belongs to communities that are traditionally Albanian Orthodox, and approximately 10 percent are Roman Catholics. The Orthodox Church became independent from Constantinople's authority in 1929 but was not recognized as autocephalous (independent) until 1937. The Church's 1954 statute states that all its archbishops must have Albanian citizenship; however, the current archbishop is a Greek citizen who is still seeking Albanian citizenship.

Muslims are found throughout the country but are concentrated mostly in the middle of the country and to a lesser extent in the south. The Orthodox live mainly in the south, and Roman Catholics in the north of the country; however, this division is not strict, particularly in the case of many urban centers, which have mixed populations. The Greek minority, concentrated in the south, belongs almost exclusively to the Orthodox Church. No data are available on active participation in formal religious services, but estimates indicate that 30 to 40 percent of the population practices a religion. Foreign religious representatives, including Muslim clerics, Christian and Baha'i missionaries, members of Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and many others freely carry out religious activities.

According to the State Committee on Cults, during the period covered by this report, there were approximately 17 different Muslim societies and groups active in the country; some of these groups were foreign. There were 30 Christian societies, not including evangelical groups, representing more than 74 different organizations. Additionally, there are 571 Christian, Baha'i and Jehovah's Witnesses missionaries, and 379 Catholic and 115 Muslim missionaries. The largest foreign missionary groups were American, British, Italian, Greek, and Arab.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. 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. The Chairman of the Committee has the status of a deputy minister and answers directly to the Prime Minister. The Committee recognizes the equality of religious communities and respects their independence. The Committee is charged with working to protect freedom of religion and to promote interreligious cooperation and understanding. The 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 that the Committee did not facilitate access to residency permits during the period covered by this report. In 2004, the State Committee on Cults assisted 1,084 foreigners in obtaining residency permits.

There is no law or regulation forcing religious organizations to notify the Committee of their activities; however, Article 10 of the Constitution calls for separate bilateral agreements to regulate relations between the Government and religious communities. In the period covered by this report, the Government drafted separate bilateral agreements with the four predominant religious communities (Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic). To date, only the Catholics have finalized their bilateral agreement with the Government. It is expected the other bilateral agreements will be finalized in 2005.

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.

In December 2004, the Government hosted a regional summit with the heads of states from Southeast Europe to promote interethnic and interreligious dialogue. In March 2005, in a ceremony organized by the nonprofit group Religions for Peace, the four predominant religious communities signed a statement of shared moral commitment. Under this initiative, the religious leaders committed themselves to promoting tolerance, coexistence, and respect for other faiths. According to official figures, there are 14 religious-affiliated schools in the country, with approximately 2,600 students. The Ministry of Education has the right to approve the curricula of religious-affiliated schools to ensure their compliance with national education standards, and the State Committee on Cults oversees implementation.

In January 2005, a new Roman Catholic-affiliated university with 200 students, the Lady of Good Counsel, was opened in Tirana. Additionally, the Government made a verbal commitment to allow the development of a Muslim-affiliated university.

There are 85 vocational training centers with approximately 6,000 students administered by religious communities. Some organizations described difficulty in registering religious-affiliated schools. As a result, religious-affiliated schools and vocational training centers continued to operate either as unregistered religious schools or converted to a secular curriculum or were closed. The Government reported the closing of several schools because they were unregistered or had changed the activities for which they were registered. Inspections by the Ministry of Education resulted in the closure of 12 religious-affiliated schools and kindergartens.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Government is secular. The Ministry of Education asserts 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 Communist government banned all religious practices and expropriated the property of the established Islamic, Orthodox, 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. 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. The Government does not have the resources to compensate churches adequately for the extensive damage many religious properties suffered. Although it has recovered some confiscated property, including one large parcel of land near Tirana's main square where construction of a cathedral is under way, the Orthodox Church has claimed delays in local approvals for construction of churches and other buildings associated with the Church. Further, the Orthodox Church claims a lack of action on a number of other property claims throughout the country, as well as difficulty in recovering some religious icons for restoration and safekeeping.

The Roman Catholic community also has outstanding property claims but was able to consecrate a new cathedral in central Tirana in 2002 on land provided by the Government as compensation for other land confiscated during the Communist era. The Sunni Muslim and Bektashi communities have also requested that the Government return a number of religious properties, including, in the case of the former, a large parcel of land located across from the Parliament building in the center of Tirana on which a mosque once stood. However, the new Urban Regulatory Plan for Tirana sets aside land for a new mosque in another location. The Islamic community does not approve of this location, nor has it received permission to build a mosque in the approved location. The Bektashi community is also seeking compensation from the Government for victims of religious prosecution during the Communist regime.

In July 2004, Parliament approved a new law on the restitution and compensation of properties confiscated during the Communist regime. According to the new 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 Government has not established a monetary fund for compensation.

The Albanian Evangelical Alliance, an association of approximately 98 Protestant churches throughout the country, claimed that it encountered obstacles in accessing the media. However, Evangelical Alliance representatives stated that it was not clear whether the limited access was due to the organization's small size or to its religious affiliation. The growing evangelical community has expanded its relationship with the country's various public institutions such as the universities.

In response to media reports alleging because of their teachings, Jehovah's Witnesses were responsible for a recent series of juvenile suicides (see Section III), the state police announced all "suspicious sects" in the country would be

investigated and examined. At the time of this report, no such "suspicious sects" had been investigated or examined. The Government also banned the dissemination of religious literature in "public places." The Government provided no definition of "public places," but it is assumed this ban refers to public schools and government facilities.

There were few Jews in the country before WWII. During WWII, many Jews from other countries found shelter in the country, but almost all emigrated to Israel after 1991. There are believed to be fewer than 100 Jews left in the country, and there were no reports of synagogues or community centers functioning in the country.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Society is largely secular. Intermarriage among members of different religions is extremely common. Religious communities take pride in the tolerance and understanding that prevail among them.

Early in 2005, some elements of the media repeatedly attacked the Jehovah's Witnesses community, alleging their influence in a recent series of juvenile suicides. These accusations led to increased incidents of intimidation and threats of violence against Jehovah's Witnesses. Other religious communities expressed similar problems after the media attack on the Jehovah's Witnesses community. Additionally, the media also alleged that the death of two Muslim men while preparing explosives was related to their membership in the Islamic community.

The investigation regarding the 2003 killing of Sali Tivari, the former General Secretary of the Islamic Community, was ongoing.

Representatives of the Orthodox Church expressed concerns that some churches, crosses, and other buildings were the targets of vandalism, although these incidents were isolated and believed to be the result of weaknesses in the country's public order mechanisms rather than due to religious intolerance.

In June 2004, Kastriot Myftari, author of the book "Albanian National Islamism," was acquitted of all charges of inciting religious hatred.

Unlike in some previous years, the Bektashi community did not experience intimidation, threats, vandalism or violence.

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 foster the development of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in the country, and to further religious freedom and tolerance. The U.S. Embassy continues to urge the Government to address outstanding religious property claims and to return church lands 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's Public Affairs Office 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. Traditionally tolerant in religious affairs, the society is nonetheless subject to a range of external influences. Projects that support inter-faith understanding and that strengthen civic education in religious-affiliated schools help ensure that tradition is preserved as forms of Islam and Christianity, new to the country, seek to take root.

In July 2004, a group of religious leaders participated in a three-week International Visitor's program to gather insight into the nature of religious diversity in the U.S.,

including the educational role of religious institutions and the mechanisms through which religious communities play a positive role in a vibrant civil society.

From September 2004 through April 2005, using an Embassy grant, the "Civic and Faith-based Education Project" continued to expand 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 high schools in Tirana. The project seeks to replicate this experience in other Muslim-affiliated high schools throughout the country.

The Embassy also continued to support the project "Tolerance Days in Religious Schools" through which secular and religious community leaders, government officials, and others explored how to strengthen mutual understanding among faiths. The United States Agency for International Development continued its project on fostering religious tolerance. This 2-year project started in May 2004 and seeks to support the peaceful coexistence of different religious groups and to foster greater understanding among persons of different faiths.