

ALBANIA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

According to the constitution, the state is neutral in matters of belief, recognizes the equality and independence of religious groups, prohibits religious discrimination and guarantees freedom of conscience and religion. The government had agreements with five religious groups to govern its relations with them as stipulated in the constitution. It provided funding to four of these groups. Religious groups reported little progress on more than 1,000 outstanding claims for government restitution or return of property seized during the communist era. The Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania expressed anger over the destruction by local authorities of a structure it said was a church.

Through the Interreligious Council of Albania, leaders of the Sunni Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Bektashi communities met to discuss common concerns. In January the heads of the Catholic, Sunni Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities participated along with the prime minister in a march in Paris to honor victims of the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack.

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. The embassy expanded its civic education program, which taught the compatibility of civic and religious values. Embassy officials spoke to audiences at public high schools as well as Islamic, Catholic, and Orthodox religious schools about the importance of religious tolerance. The embassy also worked with the religious community to discourage violent extremism, particularly among youth. This effort included facilitating discussions between religious, political, and law enforcement actors.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.0 million (July 2015 estimate). According to a 2011 census, Sunni Muslims constitute nearly 57 percent of the population, Roman Catholics 10 percent, members of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania nearly 7 percent, and members of the Bektashi Order (a form of Shia Sufism) 2 percent. Other groups include Protestant denominations, Bahais, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and a small Jewish community. Nearly 20 percent of respondents declined to answer the optional question about religious affiliation.

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The State Committee on Cults reports approximately 230 religious organizations, foundations, and educational institutions operate in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates there is no official religion, all religions are equal, and the state has the duty to respect and protect religious coexistence. It declares the state is neutral in questions of belief and recognizes the independence of religious groups. According to the constitution, relations between the state and religious groups are regulated by agreements between these groups and the Council of Ministers and ratified by the assembly.

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and guarantees freedom of conscience, religion, and free expression. It states everyone is free to choose or change their religion or beliefs and to express them individually, collectively, in public, or in private. The constitution also states individuals may not be compelled to participate or excluded from participating in a religious community or its practices, or to make their beliefs or faith public or be prohibited from doing so. It prohibits political parties or other groups from inciting religious hatred.

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 assistance, and support foreign employees of religious groups in obtaining residence permits.

The government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups, but to obtain official status a religious group must register with the 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 its founders and legal representatives, and its management structures and their manner of operation, an address at which the organization can be reached, and payment of a 1,000 lek (\$8) fee to the district court. A judge is randomly assigned within 3-4 days of the submission of an application, and the process

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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 government has agreements with the Catholic Church, the Sunni Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities, and the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania (VUSH), a Protestant umbrella organization. The bilateral agreements serve to codify arrangements pertaining to official recognition, property restitution, direct financial support from the government, and/or tax exemptions.

The law requires the Agency for the Restitution and Compensation of Property to give priority to claims by religious groups for properties confiscated during the communist era.

The law allows religious communities to build and manage religious cemeteries on land the communities own.

In October the government amended the law formally allowing religious institutions to operate kindergartens.

Public schools are secular, and the law prohibits religious instruction in them. Private schools may offer religious instruction. 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 nonreligious curricula must comply with national education standards. Catholic, Muslim, and Orthodox groups operate numerous state-licensed kindergartens, schools, and universities. Most of these do not have mandatory religion classes, but offer them as an elective. The Muslim community runs seven madrassahs that teach religion in addition to the state-sponsored curriculum.

Government Practices

The commissioner for the protection from discrimination did not receive any new cases of religious discrimination but issued decisions for two cases from 2014. In one decision issued in January, the commissioner ruled in favor of a 16-year-old Muslim girl who said she had been denied the right to attend public school by the school's principal after she began to wear a headscarf. Although there was no legal prohibition against religious clothing in schools, principals maintained the

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right to set standards for “appropriate clothing,” which in some instances included restrictions on public displays of religious symbols. The commissioner determined the ban constituted discrimination and asked the Ministry of Education and Sports to rescind it. The ministry appealed the decision to the Tirana First Instance Administrative Court. The court upheld the commissioner’s decision, and the student returned to school in April.

In the other decision, involving a district prosecutor at the Dibra District Prosecutor's Office who alleged the general prosecutor at that office had transferred him because of his religious beliefs, the commissioner dismissed the case after the plaintiff decided not to pursue his complaint.

Religious groups reported there was slow progress on their claims for restitution or return of property seized during the communist era. Groups blamed this in part on government corruption and legal complexities stemming from the country’s communist past – in particular competing title claims. There were no reports of the government returning properties to any religious community, which the communities generally preferred over financial compensation. The government agreed to compensate the Albanian Islamic Community (AIC) for four properties – one in Korca and three in Tirana. Religious communities reported that since the fall of the previous communist regime, they had submitted well over 1,000 claims to the Agency for the Restitution and Compensation of Property, and the vast majority of these remained unresolved.

In August the local Urban Building Inspectorate demolished a building in Dhermi local parishioners stated was an Orthodox church. According to authorities, the church had been built illegally on the site where a 17th-century church had previously existed, and the location was an important cultural heritage site for the country. The event led to public debate with the Greek government over how the situation was handled and several politicians openly expressed their objections to Greek interference in what they considered an internal matter. On this and other occasions, some politicians told the media they were wary of what they perceived to be Greek influence over the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania and they made a point to highlight the country’s Orthodox Christians were Albanian and not Greek. In October at the request of the Greek-minority Union for Human Rights Party, Prime Minister Edi Rama delivered testimony on the August demolition, where he defended the actions of the authorities. The Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania continued to protest the demolition.

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Some religious groups said disputes over property ownership and problems in tracking or registering land ownership made it difficult to acquire new land 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. Only 10 percent of VUSH congregations owned their own places of worship; the rest rented existing buildings.

In May during the visit of the Turkish president, the AIC inaugurated a new central mosque in Tirana on land previously returned to the AIC through the restitution process. The Turkish government funded the mosque construction.

In September the Bektashi community inaugurated its world headquarters in Tirana to serve as a central place of worship, a multipurpose center, and the seat of the global Bektashi community. The government assisted in financing the construction. The Bektashi were also constructing or restoring several places of worship in Korca, Permet, Gjirokaster, and Elbasan. Property disputes with the government delayed progress.

The government continued financial support for the Catholic, Sunni Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities, according to representatives of these groups. Financial support for these four groups remained the same as the previous year at 109 million lek (\$868,250), divided four ways among them, with the Muslim Community receiving a slightly larger share.

The government still did not provide financial support to the VUSH despite their bilateral agreement, as the government had not amended the original law providing for financial support to these groups to include the VUSH or drafted a separate law. In addition, the VUSH stated its churches faced problems over tax payment requirements despite an exemption granted by the law. According to the VUSH, the government froze some of its churches' bank accounts for lack of payment. The VUSH made several requests to the Ministries of Finance and Social Welfare and Youth to discuss these issues, but as of December neither ministry had met with them.

Catholic, Orthodox, and Bektashi representatives all continued to maintain their numbers were underrepresented in the 2011 official census and that undercounting their adherents portrayed an inaccurate picture of the religious demographics of the country.

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Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania's archbishop of Tirana, Dures and all Albania faced some criticism directed at the links he was perceived to have with the Greek government.

Through the Interreligious Council of Albania, leaders of the Sunni Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, and Bektashi communities discussed common concerns. Religious leaders frequently attended the celebrations of other religious communities. In January the heads of the Catholic, Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities participated along with Prime Minister Rama in a march in Paris to honor victims of the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack. In September all religious communities participated in the annual International Meetings of Prayer for Peace, held in Tirana and sponsored by the Community of St. Egidio, a Catholic group.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with the state commissioner on cults and urged the government to address religious property claims and return to religious groups the buildings, land, and other 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 an 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.

Through a civic education program, embassy officers spoke to students at Islamic, Catholic, and Orthodox religious schools, public high schools, and other educational institutions to promote religious freedom and tolerance. As part of the program, students from both the Catholic high school and the madrasah in Shkoder worked together on a presentation highlighting how their religious faiths made them more tolerant citizens. With embassy funding, 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.

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The U.S. embassy worked with religious communities, along with state and nongovernmental actors, to address violent extremism among youth by providing constructive alternatives. Activities included seminars with key religious figures; discussions with leaders in government, law enforcement, and academia; and service projects addressing environmental and poverty issues.