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Macedonia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. In April parliament passed a new antidiscrimination law, scheduled to be implemented on January 1, 2011, to protect against different forms of discrimination including discrimination based in religious beliefs.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period; however, some groups complained of political influence on the registration process.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials advocated for improved dialogue and cooperation among religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 9,781 square miles and a population of 2.1 million. The country's two major religious groups are Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Approximately 65 percent of the population is Macedonian Orthodox, and 32 percent is Muslim. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, various Protestant denominations, and Jews.

There is a general correlation between ethnicity and religious affiliation--the majority of Orthodox believers are ethnic Macedonian, and the majority of Muslim believers are ethnic Albanian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

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There is no official state religion, but a 2001 amendment to the constitution specifically lists five religious groups: the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC), Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM), Roman Catholic Church, Jewish community, and Evangelical Methodist Church. Members of other religious groups asserted that this led to favorable treatment by the government towards these five groups.

The law requires religious groups to register in order to acquire status as legal entities and states that all (registered) groups are separate from the state and equal before the law. The law details application materials for new registrants and a timeline in which the court must issue its rulings. The name and official insignia of new groups must be different from the names and insignia of already-registered groups, but the law allows multiple groups of a single faith to register. The courts have interpreted the law to require that the registered leaders of religious groups be Macedonian citizens.

Foreigners with registered religious groups who seek to enter the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites must obtain a work visa before arriving. Religious groups reported that the process takes approximately four months. There was no procedure for nonregistered groups to apply for visas for religious workers.

Private religious primary schools are not allowed under the law, but there are no restrictions on private religious schools at secondary levels and above, or on religious education that takes place in religious spaces such as churches and mosques.

The Ministry of Education began a new course during the 2010-11 school year that requires fifth grade students to elect from three choices: Introduction to Religions, Ethics in Religion, or Classical Culture in European Civilization. There were no reports of controversy over introduction of these courses. In 2009 a religious education course, which included a single-faith religious option, was ruled by the Constitutional Court to be inconsistent with the constitution's separation of church and state.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Orthodox Easter, Christmas, and Ramazan Bajram (end of Ramadan). Other Christian, Islamic, and Jewish holidays are not national holidays, but they are government-designated religious holidays for adherents of those faiths.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. Implementation of the registration procedures for religious organizations improved; however, some groups complained of political influence in the registration process. The dominant MOC remained the sole Orthodox group registered. The Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo), an Islamic Sufi order that is involved in a long-running property dispute with the ICM, has also been unable to gain registration.

Skopje Court II is responsible for registering religious groups under the 2007 law. During the reporting period, the court approved one new applicant--the Ehlibejtska Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Kicevo)--and rejected five applicants--the Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo), the Greek Orthodox Archbishopric of the Patriarchy of Pec (the Orthodox

Archbishopric of Ohrid), the Church of Orthodox Unity, the Church of the True Orthodox Christians, and the True Monastic Community.

The problem of restitution of religious properties expropriated by the former Yugoslav government was not fully resolved. Several religious communities have not regained full ownership of many of the properties expropriated by the communist regime. Ownership of almost all churches and many mosques has been restored to the appropriate religious communities but not most other properties. Restitution or compensation claims are complicated by the fact that the seized properties often have changed hands or have been developed since they were confiscated. The ICM claimed it was not able to regain rightful use of several mosques that the government had agreed to return. In addition, the ICM alleged that in some cases the government delayed the process of restitution by selling or starting new construction on disputed property and by disputing the historical legal claim of the ICM to religious properties. Reconstruction of a mosque in Prilep, which was destroyed during the 2001 conflict, and construction of a mosque in the Bitola village of Lazhec did not begin as expected. The ICM continued to meet with government officials to seek to resolve property matters.

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There were no developments in the suit that the Bektashi initiated against the government in 2002 for failing to reverse the former Yugoslavia's nationalization of the Bektashi's Tetovo compound, known as the Arabati Baba Tekke. In addition, there were no developments in the 2004 suit the Bektashi filed against the ICM for the 2002 seizure of part of the Tetovo compound by armed ICM members. At the end of the reporting period, the ICM continued to occupy the area.

Several small religious groups complained of bureaucratic obstacles to construction or ownership of houses of worship and alleged that these obstacles made it very difficult to construct new churches or to enlarge existing structures. At the end of the reporting period, the transfer of ownership of a meeting hall near Kriva Palanka to the Jehovah's Witnesses remained blocked by the municipal government.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There was one report of abuse of religious freedom in the country. On July 19, the appellate court denied the appeal of Jovan Vraniskovski of his sentence of 30 months' imprisonment and a fine of 250,000 euro (\$340,000). Vraniskovski, leader of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid, left the country prior to the court ruling and had not begun serving the sentence. Vraniskovski was arrested on an international warrant in Bulgaria in November 17 and held on home detention. He had not been extradited to Macedonia at year end.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Representatives of the ICM accused suspended cleric Ramadan Ramadani of spreading radical Islam through his sermons at Isa Beg mosque. In July the ICM announced that "radical Wahhabists" controlled four mosques in Skopje, including Isa Beg. On September 20, the ICM called on "the government, ethnic Albanian political parties, state institutions, and all foreign diplomats in Macedonia to support the ICM and take measures against these radical structures." Ramadani denied any connections with radical Islamic groups, accused the ICM leadership of corruption, and initiated a petition for the removal of its president.

Members of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid claimed that they were subjected to undue government monitoring and harassment, including being delayed by border guards, based on their religious beliefs. Led by defrocked MOC bishop Jovan Vraniskovski, this group does not recognize the MOC's self-declared autocephaly. The autocephaly of the MOC is also not recognized by other Orthodox churches.

The Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo) reported they received a letter from a splinter group calling for Baba Edmond Brahimaj, the leader of the community, to abandon the Arabati Baba Tekke and depart the country. Shortly afterward, on November 21, supporters of the splinter group, which includes a former secretary general of the community, entered the tekke with the intent of expelling Baba Edmond, who was not present at the time. The two groups confronted one another, then separated with no violence. The headquarters of the World of the Bektashian Community in Tirana condemned the incident.

The Bektashi reported vandalism and theft of community property during the reporting period. On December 12 a fire badly damaged a building within the tekke, which the group maintained was the result of a deliberate act of arson. The police ruled the fire to be the result of an accidental electrical short-circuit.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador and other embassy representatives frequently met with government officials and representatives of religious communities to address religious freedom and to support ethnic and religious tolerance.

On August 26, the ambassador hosted an iftar (evening meal during Ramadan) in observance of the holy month of Ramadan and to promote religious and ethnic tolerance. The event was attended by members of various religious communities as well as government officials.

On October 14, the embassy hosted a second annual interfaith food and blood drive with the Red Cross of Skopje. Representatives from several religious communities participated along with government officials, the speaker of parliament, the minister of defense, members of parliament, and the public. Besides collecting donations, the goal of the event was to bring together persons from different religious groups and ethnicities for a day of community service. The event was widely covered by the media.

The ambassador and other embassy representatives attended events to foster religious freedom, tolerance, and understanding, including events to commemorate the 100th anniversary of Mother Teresa's birth and holiday celebrations for various religious groups.

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