



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report](#) » [Europe and Eurasia](#) » Cyprus

## Cyprus

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.

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.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

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

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 3,572 square miles and an estimated population in the government-controlled area of 797,000. Prior to 1974, the country experienced a long period of strife between its Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities. In response the UN Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) began peacekeeping operations in 1964. The island has been divided de facto since the Turkish military intervention of 1974, following a coup d'état directed from Greece. The southern part of the island is under the control of the government of the Republic of Cyprus (ROC), while the northern part is administered by Turkish Cypriots. In 1983 their administration proclaimed itself the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" ("TRNC"). The United States does not recognize the "TRNC," nor does any other country except Turkey. A buffer zone, or "green line," patrolled by the UNFICYP, separates the two parts. In 2003 Turkish Cypriot authorities relaxed many restrictions on movement between the two communities, including abolishing all crossing fees. The new procedures led to relatively unimpeded contact between the communities and permitted Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots to visit religious sites

located in the other community. The area administered by Turkish Cypriots is discussed in a separate section at the end of this report.

According to the most recent (2001) census, 95 percent of the permanent population in the government-controlled area belongs to the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus. All other religious groups combined constitute less than 5 percent of the population and include Roman Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Maronite Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Jewish, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Bahai Faith, Buddhist, and other faiths.

Recent immigrants and migrant workers generally practice different faiths from those of native-born citizens, who are predominantly Greek Orthodox. Among immigrant and migrant communities, there are practitioners of Islamic, Russian Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Buddhist faiths. There is a Buddhist meditation center in Nicosia and a synagogue in Larnaca; both are used primarily by foreign residents. The Jewish community, numbering approximately 2,000, includes a very small number of native Jewish Cypriots and a greater number of Israeli, English, and other European Jews who are part of the foreign resident community.

A 2006 opinion poll indicated that 19 percent of Greek Cypriots attended church services every Sunday, 23 percent attended once or twice a month, 35 percent attended only for major religious holidays and ceremonies such as weddings and funerals, and 19 percent rarely attended. The remainder did not attend religious services.

## 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>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The constitution specifies that the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus, which is an authority independent of the Greek Orthodox Church in Greece, has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its holy canons and charter. The Church of Cyprus is exempt from taxes with regard to religious activity and, according to law, is required to pay taxes only on strictly commercial activities. The constitution also lays out guidelines for the Vakif, the Muslim institution that regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots, which similarly has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its laws and principles. No legislative, executive, or other act may contravene or interfere with the Orthodox Church or the Vakif. However, the Vakif operated only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots during the reporting period and did not administer mosques located in the government-controlled area; these mosques, serving worshippers primarily from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, received financial support from the government and from Libya.

The constitution recognizes three minority religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and "Latins" (Roman Catholics). These groups are also exempt from taxes and are eligible, along with the Church of Cyprus and the Vakif, for government subsidies for their religious institutions.

The 1975 Vienna III Agreement remains the basic agreement covering treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronites living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots living in the government-controlled area. Among other provisions, this agreement provides for facilities for religious worship.

In May the minister of education, other government officials, and the teachers union confirmed the government's policy that all students have the equal right to use religious symbols, including wearing a headscarf, at school.

Religious groups other than the five recognized ones are not required to register with the government; however, if they desire to engage in financial transactions and maintain a bank account, they must register as nonprofit organizations. In order to register, a group must submit through an attorney an application that states the purposes of the nonprofit organization and provides the names of the organization's directors. Upon approval, nonprofit organizations are tax-exempt and are required to provide annual reports. The Ministry of Commerce reported that no religious groups were denied registration during the reporting period.

There are no prohibitions against missionary activity or proselytizing in the government-controlled area. Foreign missionaries must obtain and periodically renew residence permits to live in the country; renewal requests normally are approved, despite some applicants experiencing delays.

The government requires children in public primary and secondary schools to take instruction in the Greek Orthodox religion. Primary school students of other religions may be exempted from attending religious services and instruction at the request of their guardians. Students in secondary education may be exempted from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience and may be exempted from attending religious services on any grounds at the request of their guardians, or their own, if they are over the age of 16.

The government recognizes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Annunciation, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Holy Spirit Day (Pentecost), Assumption, and Christmas.

#### 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.

In October the Ombudsman's Office issued a report addressing religious exemptions in school, a result of a complaint previously filed with the office. In the complaint, the parents of a 13-year old Jehovah's Witness student said the school delayed their child's exemption from religious instruction for several months and, when the student was finally excused from religious instruction, the school did not make arrangements for the student to engage in supervised school activities during the time of religious instruction class, as required by the regulation. The Ombudsman's Office's investigation concluded in October that there were gaps and omissions in the implementation of the exemption procedure and made relevant recommendations to the Ministry of Education. Jehovah's Witnesses also reported that their members' children were not exempted from attending school performances containing religious content.

Although nonprofit registrations generally are granted promptly, some religious groups and faith communities reported difficulties in registering as nonprofit charities and stated that the government was unresponsive to inquiries regarding the status of applications. The difficulties with registration prevented them from being able to open bank accounts or arrange for tax-deductible donations.

Since 2003, when restrictions on movement to the northern part of the island were relaxed, Greek Orthodox Cypriots as well as other religious groups have reported better access to religious sites in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. Turkish Cypriots enjoyed relatively easy access to religious sites in the government-controlled area; however, a Turkish Cypriot authority reported that Turkish Cypriot cemeteries and mosques in the villages of Kosi and Aplanda in the Larnaca district were inaccessible, since they reportedly were within Greek Cypriot military camps.

The Ministry of Interior (MOI) reported that its 2011 budget provides 814,300 euros (\$1.1 million) for the conservation of 17 mosques and other Islamic places of worship in the government-controlled area. The Department of Antiquities budget for the year for the conservation of the 17 mosques, which are considered historical monuments, was 32,500 euros (\$39,800)

plus labor costs. Of the 17 mosques, only eight were open for public use, despite increased demand caused by an influx of Muslim asylum seekers, migrant workers, and students.

The Buddhist community continued to face difficulties finding a site for a permanent temple in Nicosia due to an inability to obtain necessary permits from local municipalities. A member of the community reported that the group purchased land in the countryside to construct a new temple after a Nicosia municipal official threatened to close any unauthorized Buddhist temples; however, only 6 percent of the land can be used to build habitable structures, and the group was seeking a variance from the regulation. In the meantime, the community was using a meditation center in Nicosia as a temple. In contrast with previous reports, the Buddhist community did not report any disturbances by local police.

The Bahai community again reported that it often faced difficulty burying its dead, since cemeteries generally exist only for recognized religious groups. As a result, Bahai burials took place in cemeteries for foreign residents used by other denominations.

The Jewish community reported that it did not receive a water source for its cemetery from the Larnaca municipality and contended that the government is legally required to provide one; the lack of water made it difficult for the community to perform traditional cleansing after burials. In addition they reported that the government was unresponsive to repeated requests to locate suitable land for the construction of a synagogue; consequently, religious services were held in a private residence.

Missionaries have the legal right to proselytize; it is illegal for a missionary to use "physical or moral compulsion" to make religious conversions. Police may investigate missionary activity based on a citizen's complaint. They may also open an investigation if missionaries are suspected of being involved in illegal activities that threaten the security of the republic, constitutional or public order, or public health and morals.

Several religious groups reported difficulties obtaining visas and residency permits from the government for clergy and student volunteers from countries outside the European Union. Applications and renewals were not processed in a timely manner, and some groups reported that members were thus forced to leave the country rather than risk being blacklisted for staying in the country illegally.

Conscientious objectors, including religious ones, are exempt from active military duty; however, they are legally required to complete an alternative military service and perform reservist duty in the Greek Cypriot National Guard. During the previous reporting period, the Ombudsman's Office investigated complaints from some conscientious objectors about the procedures used by the government to confirm their conscientious objector status and eligibility for alternative military service. The international nonprofit organization Conscience and Peace Tax International reported that the stipulated duration of alternative service for conscientious objectors was punitive compared to military service.

During the military swearing-in ceremony, Orthodox clergy lead a common prayer; while recruits may be excused from taking part in the prayer, minority religious groups reported that this option was rarely used, because recruits did not want to bring negative attention to themselves.

Unlike previous reporting periods, there were no complaints from prisoners in the "open prison"-- a special detention section of the ROC's Central Prison where low-risk prisoners receive special privileges--concerning the continued lack of adequate religious facilities. The government planned to complete an expansion of the facilities by the end of 2011.

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners and detainees, in the country.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The bicomunal Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage, established in 2008 as part of the UN-brokered peace process to preserve secular and religious cultural monuments and help improve relations between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots, established a bicomunal team of technical experts during this reporting period. The team is expected to undertake the restoration of a church in the area under Turkish Cypriot administration and a mosque in the government-controlled area.

In September, for the second year in a row, several hundred Turkish Cypriots celebrated the "Night of Power" (Kadir Gecesi) at the historic Hala Sultan Mosque in Larnaca. Last year was the first time since 1974 that this event was celebrated at the mosque.

### 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, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Newspapers reported, and a community leader confirmed, that a mosque in Larnaca was vandalized on November 5 following clashes between participants in an antiracism NGO event and demonstrators marching against the presence in Cyprus of undocumented migrants. Police were notified, and an investigation was ongoing at year's end.

The Jewish community's Hanukkah display in Larnaca was vandalized on November 30 and December 1. Vandals spray-painted the light bulbs of a menorah representation placed at a public location near the community's center and painted targets, swastikas, and stylized letters "SS" on and near the display. The community notified the police, which reportedly responded by collecting evidence and launching an investigation. An investigation was ongoing at year's end. There were continued reports of verbal harassment of members of the Jewish community.

A local NGO reported two incidents of public school teachers who made negative comments toward Muslim students, but no formal complaints were filed. Some religious groups reported that students occasionally suffered negative reactions from teachers and fellow students when taking advantage of the exemption from religious instruction.

Turkish Cypriot authorities reported that Greek Cypriot maintenance of mosques was limited to monuments in the main city centers and tourist areas, and other unused mosques in the government-controlled area were neglected.

Some religious groups also reported that Greek Cypriot converts from the Greek Orthodox religion to other faiths faced social ostracism. However, relations between the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and other religious communities in the government-controlled area were cordial.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In the context of its reconciliation programs, the U.S. government supported the work of coalitions that included religious communities seeking to preserve cultural heritage sites, including historic churches and mosques, and promote joint action and mutual respect.

### AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Since 1974 the northern part of Cyprus has been administered by Turkish Cypriot authorities. In 1983 it proclaimed itself the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" ("TRNC"). The United States does not recognize the "TRNC," nor does any other country except Turkey.

The "basic law" and other "laws" and policies in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots generally protect religious freedom and, in practice, Turkish Cypriot authorities generally enforced these protections. The "law" refers specifically to a "secular republic"; however, the politically divisive environment of Cyprus has resulted in restrictions on religious freedom, particularly for Greek Cypriot Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Maronite Christians.

The Turkish Cypriot authorities generally respected religious freedom in "law" and in practice; however, Greek Cypriot Orthodox and Maronite Catholics were required to obtain prior permission to celebrate Sunday liturgy at locations other than seven designated religious sites and an eighth site that was opened for two hours each Sunday. They were also required to obtain prior permission to celebrate special liturgies at all locations. At the end of the reporting period, Turkish Cypriot authorities prevented Greek Cypriot Orthodox congregations from holding Christmas liturgy at two designated sites. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period; however, an increase in bureaucratic restrictions raised concerns about the future status of respect for religious freedom.

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

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with Turkish Cypriot authorities as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

### Section I. Religious Demography

According to a count in April 2006, the population in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots was estimated at 265,000. Nominally 98 percent of this population is Sunni Muslim. An estimated 10,000, mostly immigrant workers from Turkey of Turkish, Kurdish, or Arab origin, are Alevis ("followers of Ali"), who follow a strand of Shia Islam with some pre-Islamic influences. There are also followers of other schools of Islam. There is a Turkish Cypriot Bahai community of approximately 200 persons as well as a small Jewish community of foreign expatriates. Most non-Muslims residing in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots are foreigners from Western Europe who are generally members of the Roman Catholic or Anglican churches.

Approximately 8 percent of the nominally Muslim population in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots regularly attends weekly religious services, and 1.3 percent attends more than once a week.

### 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 Turkish Cypriot authorities' acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/appendices/138979.htm>.

The "basic law" and other "laws" and policies in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots generally protect religious freedom and, in practice, Turkish Cypriot authorities generally enforced these protections.

The "law" does not recognize any specific religion. However, it states that the Vakif, the Muslim institution that regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots, has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with Vakif laws and principles. The Vakif is tax-exempt in its religious activities, but its commercial operations are subject to applicable taxes. It also receives subsidies. No other religious organization is tax-exempt or receives subsidies.

Turkish Cypriot authorities bar religious discrimination. The 1975 Vienna III Agreement is the basic agreement covering treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronites living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots living

in the government-controlled area. Among other provisions, the agreement provides for facilities for religious worship, stating that "the Greek Cypriots at present in the north of the island are free to stay and they will be given every help to lead a normal life, including facilities for education and for the practice of their religion, as well as medical care by their own doctors and freedom of movement in the north."

Religious organizations are not required to register with authorities unless they wish to engage in commercial activity or apply for tax-exempt status.

There is compulsory instruction in religion, culture, and ethics in grades three through eight in all schools. At the high school level, such instruction is optional. There is no formal Islamic religious instruction in public schools, and there are no "state-supported" religious schools.

The following holy days are observed widely in the Turkish Cypriot community: Ramadan Bayram, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Kurban Bayram.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Turkish Cypriot authorities generally respected religious freedom in "law" and in practice; however, Greek Cypriot Orthodox and Maronite Catholics were required to obtain prior permission to celebrate Sunday liturgy at locations other than seven designated religious sites and an eighth site that was opened for two hours each Sunday. They were also required to obtain prior permission to celebrate special liturgies at all locations. At the end of the reporting period, Turkish Cypriot authorities prevented Greek Cypriot Orthodox congregations from holding Christmas liturgy at two designated sites. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period; however, an increase in bureaucratic restrictions raised concerns about the future status of respect for religious freedom.

Some religious groups reported monitoring of their activities by Turkish Cypriot authorities, including "police," that was perceived as intimidation and harassment.

Greek Cypriot Orthodox and Maronite Catholics continued to be prohibited from visiting most religious sites located in military zones in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. The Jewish community reported that a cemetery remained inaccessible, due to its location in a military zone.

Greek Cypriot Orthodox and Maronite Catholics were allowed to perform religious services on Sundays on a regular basis, without prior permission, at eight sites in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots that were designated by the Turkish Cypriot authorities; requests for permission were required 30 days in advance to celebrate special liturgies at these sites as well as to celebrate liturgies at other religious sites in the area.

Some religious groups complained that authorities often took several months to respond to such requests for permission, often not communicating a positive answer until only days before the requested date for a ceremony, and thus interfering with the ability of those coming from abroad to participate.

In November Turkish Cypriot authorities did not allow a Greek Cypriot Orthodox bishop, whose authority is not accepted by Turkish Cypriot officials, to conduct services, which were instead conducted by a Greek Orthodox priest resident in the north.

On December 25, Turkish Cypriot authorities interrupted a Greek Cypriot Orthodox congregation's Christmas liturgy, stating the congregation did not have permission to hold the special service. Turkish Cypriot "police" reportedly entered the church, directed the priest to stop the liturgy, and escorted the priest and parishioners out of the church. A Christmas liturgy in a second church was canceled due to lack of permission.

Religious groups complained that some religious sites, many to which they had little or no access, were damaged or close to collapse. Turkish Cypriot authorities reported having spent 546,430 Turkish lira (\$346,000) since 2006 to complete the restoration of 15 Orthodox churches in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

While Turkish Cypriot authorities facilitated the construction of a number of mosques with funding from Turkey, construction of facilities for non-Sunni Muslims remained unfunded despite some groups lacking facilities.

Alevis, recognized by Turkish Cypriot authorities only as an association and not as a religious group, reported they were unable to build a cem evi (assembly house) for gatherings due to lack of funding. They also reported that due to "regulations," they were required to conduct funerals inside mosques, contrary to their traditions. As an alternative, the Alevis began raising funds for the construction of a cultural center and assembly house through private donations.

A Turkish-speaking Protestant congregation reported that authorities continued to be unresponsive to the group's application to obtain legal status as an "association," and reportedly requested that the congregation provide 15 potential names for their association that did not include any religious words. The group's inability to register to date prevented them from establishing a trust fund and purchasing property.

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots, including religious prisoners and detainees.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In July a Maronite liturgy was permitted for the first time in 36 years in Ayia Marina Church, located in a Turkish military camp; hundreds of Maronites attended. The following day Maronites attended a liturgy in the nearby Prophet Ilias Church. Greek Cypriots held services in July at Saint Prokopios Church and in September at both Saint Mamas Church and Panagiaton Pervolion Church.

The bicomunal Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage, established in 2008 as part of the UN-brokered peace process to preserve secular and religious cultural monuments and help improve relations between Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots, established a bicomunal team of technical experts. The team is expected to undertake the restoration of a church and a mosque.

#### 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.

Greek Cypriots continued to report that vandals damaged vacant Greek Orthodox churches and removed religious icons in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. According to Turkish Cypriot authorities, "police" closely investigated all such complaints of vandalism.

Several Greek Cypriot Orthodox and Maronite churches have been converted into museums or business establishments. One religious group complained that certain religious items were being held in these museums against the wishes of the community.

The Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and Greek Cypriot community groups reported that road construction projects in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots were damaging adjacent religious structures.

In a largely secular community, Turkish Cypriot religious authorities reported that Muslim parents seeking to send their children to attend religious summer courses on a voluntary basis faced strong public criticism, particularly from local teachers.

Some religious groups reported that Turkish Cypriot converts from Islam to other faiths faced social ostracism and, in at least one instance, job loss from a private sector position that they claimed was caused by their religious conversion. This group did not provide specific evidence to support this claim.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with Turkish Cypriot authorities as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In particular the U.S. embassy in Cyprus engaged at the highest levels of Turkish Cypriot leadership to express concern about the Christmas liturgy disruption and to underscore the U.S. government's deep commitment to the principle of religious freedom. In the context of its reconciliation programs, the U.S. government supported the work of coalitions that include religious communities seeking to preserve cultural heritage sites, including historic churches and mosques, and to promote joint action and mutual respect.

[Back to Top](#)