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Cyprus

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution of the Republic of Cyprus provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were few 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 796,900. 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, 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.

According to the most recent (2001) census, 95 percent of the permanent population in the government-controlled area are members of the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus. Religious groups that constitute less than 5

percent of the population include Roman Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Maronite Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Jewish, Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'i Faith, Buddhist, and others.

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 temple in Nicosia and a synagogue in Larnaca, both 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 expatriate 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

The 1960 constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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 things, this agreement provides for facilities for religious worship.

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

In May 2010 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. 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 corporate 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.

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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.

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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

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 status-of-application inquiries. 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 it spent \$522,000 (425,968 euros) in 2009 for the conservation of 17 mosques and other Islamic places of worship in the government-controlled area. The 2010 MOI budget for these activities was \$1,205,000 (983,470 euros). The Department of Antiquities spent an additional \$455,000 (371,150 euros) in 2009 on the conservation of the 17 mosques because they are also considered historical monuments. The department's 2010 budget for this purpose was \$39,800 (32,500 euros) plus labor costs. Of the 17 mosques, only five were open for public use, despite increased need caused by an influx of Muslim asylum seekers, migrant workers, and students. A second mosque opened for special services in Nicosia in 2009 to ease problems with overcrowding.

During the previous reporting period, the Ombudsman's Office investigated complaints from a Muslim prisoner that the Central Prison lacked facilities for him to exercise his religion. The Central Prison has both a mosque and a Greek Orthodox church on the grounds and reported that both are made available to prisoners once a week and on high holy days. In addition, a prisoner in the separate "open prison" filed a complaint alleging that he was prevented from attending mosque on holy days. The government acknowledged that there were limited facilities in the "open prison" for persons to

practice their religions; an expansion project was planned for completion by the end of 2011. Greek Orthodox prisoners complained that the existing church in the Central Prison was too small to accommodate all worshippers, and as a result they were unable to attend church every Sunday; prison officials reported that prisoners are permitted to visit the church in shifts.

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 Baha'i community reported that it often faced difficulty burying its dead, since cemeteries generally exist only for recognized religious groups. As a result, Baha'i burials took place in cemeteries for expatriates 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 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 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 opt out of taking part in the prayer, minority religious groups reported that this option was rarely used, because recruits did not want to bring negative attention on themselves.

In contrast with the previous report, there were no reports that the Social Welfare Services Department refused Christmas or Easter bonuses to entitled welfare recipients who were not Christians. The Ombudsman's Office examined complaints that individual social welfare officers delivered bonuses inconsistently across the island and in some cases found that the

complaints were justified. In the previous reporting period, the nongovernmental organization Future Worlds Center received complaints that the Office of Social Welfare Services discontinued welfare benefits to asylum seekers of Muslim origin who turned down jobs on pig farms based on religious objections. No similar claims were reported 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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In June 2010 Pope Benedict XVI paid an official three-day visit at the invitation of President Demetris Christofias and with the participation of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus, Maronite Church, and Latin Catholic Community.

In April 2010 members of 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, and representatives of Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot political parties cleaned a mosque in the government-controlled area and two churches in the area under Turkish Cypriot administration. In October 2009 Turkish Cypriot and Greek Cypriot committee members jointly cleaned a mosque in the government-controlled area and a church in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

In September 2009 the government approved a request by the Turkish Cypriot "Religious Affairs Director" to lead religious services in celebration of the "Night of Power" (Kadir Gecesi) at the historic Hala Sultan Mosque in Larnaca. Approximately 150 Turkish Cypriots attended the service, the first time since 1974 that the event was celebrated at the Hala Sultan Mosque.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

In September 2009 a clash involving approximately 100 persons wielding stones, sticks, and pipes occurred between rival Muslim groups at the Omeriye Mosque in Nicosia. The predominantly Sunni worshippers at the mosque objected to a smaller group preaching a conflicting interpretation of Islam. Five persons were injured before police arrived on the scene.

In contrast with the previous period, the Future Worlds Center reported no complaints of Muslim construction workers not being allowed to stop work for prayers.

The Jewish community in Larnaca reported no instances of rock or egg throwing, or other physical threats. However, there were continued reports of verbal harassment against members of the Jewish community and some reports of anti-Semitic graffiti.

In April 2009 two men were each fined \$1,530 (1,250 euros) and required to post a \$3,060 (2,500 euros) bond on a suspended two-year sentence for vandalizing a mosque in Limassol in May 2008. Press reports indicated the men were

retaliating for an attack by a group of men of Arab origin.

Some religious groups reported that students occasionally suffered negative reactions from teachers and fellow students when taking advantage of the exemption from religious instruction. Some religious groups also reported that Greek Cypriot converts from the Greek Orthodox religion to other faiths faced social ostracism.

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

Relations between the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and other religious communities in the government-controlled area were cordial. In May 2010 the Church of Cyprus donated full use of a Greek Orthodox chapel to an Anglican group.

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" in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots provides for freedom of religion, and other "laws" and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The "law" refers specifically to a "secular republic;" however, the politically divisive environment of Cyprus engendered some restrictions on religious freedom, particularly for Greek Cypriots, Armenians, and Maronites.

The Turkish Cypriot authorities generally respected religious freedom in practice but required Greek Cypriot Orthodox and Maronite Catholics to obtain prior permission to celebrate Mass at locations other than seven specific religious sites. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period.

There were few 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 was estimated at 265,100. Ninety-eight percent of this population is Sunni Muslim, at least nominally. An estimated 10,000, mostly immigrant workers from Turkey of Turkish, Kurdish, or Arab origin, are Alevi ("followers of Ali"), who follow a strand of Shi'a Islam with some pre-Islamic influences. There are also followers of other schools of Islam. There is a Turkish Cypriot Baha'i 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

The "basic law" in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots provides for freedom of religion, and other "laws" and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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 things, 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."

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

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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The authorities generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the authorities during the reporting period.

Greek Cypriot Orthodox and Maronite Catholics were prohibited from visiting religious sites located in military zones in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. The Jewish community complained 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 a regular basis, without prior permission, at seven sites in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots that were designated by the Turkish Cypriot authorities; prior permission was required to celebrate Mass at other religious sites in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

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. However, permission was granted for several group visits during the reporting period. In May 2010 a group of 200 Armenian Cypriots and international visitors made a pilgrimage to the Sourp Magar monastery. In April 2010, and again in June 2010, a group of 500 Greek Cypriots held services led by a Greek Orthodox bishop at Saint Barnabas Church. In September 2009 hundreds of Greek Cypriots attended a service at Saint Mamas Church.

There were reports that "police" disturbed religious services performed by a Greek Orthodox bishop whose authority is not accepted by Turkish Cypriot officials. In April 2010 Turkish Cypriot authorities did not allow the bishop to conduct services, which were instead conducted by a Greek Orthodox priest resident in the north. In May 2010 Turkish Cypriot authorities interrupted a religious service being conducted by the same bishop, who later continued and completed the ceremony.

Religious groups complained that some religious sites, many of which they had little or no access to, were in disrepair and close to collapse. Turkish Cypriot authorities reported having spent \$346,000 (546,430 Turkish lira) since 2006 to complete the restoration of 15 Orthodox churches in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. A stabilization and restoration project at the Maronite Prophet Elias monastery to prevent further deterioration, supported by the U.S. government through a program implemented by the U.N. Development Program and with the approval of Turkish Cypriot authorities, was completed in April 2009.

While Turkish Cypriot authorities facilitated the construction of a number of mosques with funding from Turkey, construction of facilities for non-Sunni Muslims was not funded despite some groups lacking facilities.

Alevis, recognized by Turkish Cypriot authorities only as an association and not as a religious group, reported that 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.

In contrast with the previous reporting period, a Turkish-speaking Protestant congregation reported that "police" were no longer disturbing their services. However, they reported that authorities continued to be unresponsive to their application to register as an "association," thereby preventing them from establishing a trust fund and purchasing property. Other religious groups similarly reported receiving no responses to applications to register as an "association."

Religious groups continued to report occasional monitoring by Turkish Cypriot "police" during religious and community events.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In March 2010 the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus crossed the UN-patrolled buffer zone for the first time since 1974 and visited the Apostolos Andreas monastery. Turkish Cypriot authorities greeted and escorted the archbishop during the visit.

During the reporting period, authorities provided a cemetery plot in Kyrenia for non-Muslim religious denominations to use for burials. Previously, non-Muslim groups reported difficulties in locating land for burial plots.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were few 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 turned into museums and converted into 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.

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 the context of its reconciliation programs, the U.S. government supports 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.

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