



Cyprus

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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 period covered by this report.

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 5,747 square miles and a population in the government-controlled area of 787,000.

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'etat 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 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; however, citizens, as well as foreigners, must show identification at the buffer zone crossing points to go from one side to the other.

According to the most recent (2001) population census, 94.8 percent of the permanent population in the government-controlled area belongs to the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus. Additionally, 1.5 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 1 percent Protestant, 0.6 percent Muslim, 0.5 percent Maronite Catholic, 0.3 percent Armenian Orthodox, and 1.3 percent atheist, "other," or "not stated."

There is a Buddhist temple in Nicosia. There is a synagogue in Larnaca. Both the Buddhist temple and synagogue are attended primarily by expatriates and foreign residents. The Jewish community is comprised of approximately 2,000 persons. The latter figure 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, which includes both observant and nonpracticing members. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) has a community of 200 to 300 members; Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses have communities as well.

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 only for major religious holidays and ceremonies such as weddings and funerals and 19 percent rarely attended. The remainder did not attend religious services at all.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The 1960 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 Constitution specifies that the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus, which is not under the authority of the mainland Greek Orthodox Church, 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 the 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. The Vakif, however, operated only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots during the period covered by this report. No legislative, executive, or other act may contravene or interfere with the Orthodox Church or the Vakif.

Three other religious groups are recognized in the 1960 Constitution: 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.

There are constitutional and other legal bars against religious discrimination. 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. Religious groups other than the five recognized religions are not required to register with the Government; however, if they desire to engage in financial transactions, such as maintaining a bank account, they must register as nonprofit organizations. To register, a group must submit an application through an attorney 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 of their activities. Registration is granted promptly. 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 in order to live in the country; normally, renewal requests are approved.

The Government requires children in public primary and secondary schools to take instruction in the Greek Orthodox religion. Parents of other religions may request that their children be excused; these children are then exempted from attending religious services and instruction.

The Government of Cyprus recognizes the following holy days 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 practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

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.

The Government reported that it spent \$539,000 (€348,000) in 2007 for the conservation of 17 mosques and other Islamic places of worship in the area under its control. The 2008 budget for the same activities was \$1,032,000 (€663,500).

Missionaries have the legal right to proselytize, but the Government closely monitored missionary activity. It is illegal for a missionary to use "physical or moral compulsion" to make religious conversions. The 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.

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.

The Independent Authority for Investigating Complaints and Allegations against the Police closed an investigation that resulted from a May 2006 nongovernmental organization (NGO) complaint filed with the Authority and the Ombudsman regarding police treatment of Muslim asylum seekers. The NGO reported complaints from political asylees of Muslim origin who had difficulty securing employment because of their religion. Several women also reported that potential employers

refused to hire them because of their headscarves. Another asylee alleged he could not secure housing due to his Muslim faith. The Ombudsman's Office did not proceed with an investigation because it could not locate one of the complainants. The Independent Authority asked the NGO for additional information, which the NGO was unable to provide. As a result, the Independent Authority closed the investigation. The Ombudsman's Office received no complaints of discrimination on religious grounds during the reporting period.

Several religious groups reported difficulties in registering as nonprofit charities, and that the Government was unresponsive to status-of-application inquiries.

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

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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On November 27, 2007, the Church of Cyprus hosted the Ninth General Assembly of the Middle East Council of Churches with the participation of more than 100 delegates from Christian denominations of the Middle East.

On June 13, 2007, Church of Cyprus Archbishop Chrysostomos II flew to Rome and met with Pope Benedict XVI for what was only the third meeting between the heads of the two churches. The first one was in the 16th century and the second in 1967.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of anti-Semitic incidents 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. Relations between the Church of Cyprus and other religious communities in the government-controlled area were cordial.

Several religious groups complained of difficulties buying land or constructing buildings, forcing them to rent, instead of own, the properties where their communities meet.

In May 2007 an NGO reported that it continued to receive complaints from recognized political asylees of Muslim origin who had difficulty securing employment because of their religion. An Iranian asylee alleged that he was fired from his position at a major television station with strong links to the Church of Cyprus after he mentioned that he was Muslim. The NGO alleged that the "general climate" was not amenable for asylees from countries where Islam is prevalent, and that citizens in general demonstrated "aggressive behavior" towards Muslim asylees.

During the reporting period, a number of criminal cases of suspects involved in a November 2006 attack at the English School in Nicosia were closed. Ten of the 13 accused pleaded guilty in 2007. Nine of them were minors and were sentenced to 12 months of community service, three others received the same sentence in March 2008, and one was found to have had no involvement in the incident. In November 2006, 15 to 20 Greek Cypriot teenagers, believed to be members of an ultranationalist group, National Voice of Youth with a Greek Soul, had entered the English School and attacked a group of Turkish Cypriot students, causing minor injuries. Reports in the Greek Cypriot press about an earlier incident at the same school, which reported that an 11-year-old male Turkish Cypriot student insulted a Greek Cypriot student wearing a cross, were blamed for inciting the latter event. The Government condemned the November 22 attack and called it an aberration, not one indicative of a broader atmosphere of discrimination or racial hatred against Turkish Cypriots.

Although Turkish Cypriots occasionally reported that unused mosques in the government-controlled area have been vandalized, the Government of Cyprus routinely maintains and repairs them.

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.

AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Since 1974, the northern part of Cyprus has been administered by Turkish Cypriot authorities. It proclaimed itself the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" ("TRNC") in 1983. 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 on Cyprus engendered some restrictions on religious freedom, particularly for Greek Cypriots, Armenians, and Maronites.

The Turkish Cypriot authorities generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

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, at least nominally, Sunni Muslim. An estimated 4,000, 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 smaller numbers of followers of other schools of Islam. There is a Turkish Cypriot Baha'i community of approximately 200 persons. 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 10 percent of the population in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots attends religious services regularly.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The "TRNC constitution" provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

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. The Vakif is the largest landowner in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

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 are no legal restrictions on missionary activity; however, such activity was rare.

There is instruction in religion, ethics, and comparative religions in two grades of the primary school system; however, it is not compulsory. 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 period covered by this report.

Greek Cypriot Orthodox and Maronite Catholics were prohibited from visiting religious sites located in military zones in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots, since it is illegal for civilians to enter military zones. They were allowed to conduct Mass on a regular basis, without prior permission, at seven sites in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots that had been designated by the Turkish Cypriot authorities; prior permission was required to conduct Mass at the other estimated 500 religious sites in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

A Turkish-speaking Protestant congregation continued to claim mistreatment at the hands of Turkish Cypriot authorities and some members of the public, allegedly over fears that members were proselytizing. They also complained they were unable to register as an "association" and thus could not establish a trust fund, construct a place of worship, or establish a cemetery for congregants.

In 2007 Turkish Cypriot authorities completed the restoration of five Orthodox churches in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

The U.S. Government, through a program implemented by the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) and with the approval of Turkish Cypriot authorities, in June 2008 began a stabilization and restoration project at the Maronite Prophet Elias Monastery to prevent further deterioration. Turkish military objections to traffic along the restoration road, which cut through a Turkish military installation, halted the project, but the Turkish Cypriots and UNDP agreed to clean up the site and fence off the monastery to prevent damage.

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, 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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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; there were no reported law enforcement investigations of these incidents. According to Turkish Cypriot leaders, in response to complaints of vandalism, some locations were fenced for their protection.

There were no reports of anti-Semitic incidents during the reporting period.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

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