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## Macedonia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2010**

**November 17, 2010**

The constitution and the 2007 Law on the Legal Status of Churches, Religious Communities, and Religious Groups provide for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. In April 2010 parliament passed a new antidiscrimination law, scheduled to be implemented on January 1, 2011, to protect against discrimination based on religious beliefs.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, the lack of effective implementation of the registration portion of the 2007 legal status law continued to hinder the ability of some religious groups to acquire legal standing.

There were few 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 effective and fair implementation of registration provisions of the 2007 legal status law and for improved dialogue 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 religions 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

The constitution and the 2007 Law on the Legal Status of Churches, Religious Communities, and Religious Groups provide for freedom of religion; other laws and policies also contributed to the generally free practice of religion. In April

2010 parliament passed a new antidiscrimination law to protect against discrimination based on religious beliefs; the law was scheduled to be implemented on January 1, 2011.

There is no official state religion, but a 2001 amendment to the constitution specifically mentions 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 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.

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 law allows for the registration of more than one group from each religious confession.

Foreigners entering the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites must obtain approval from the State Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups to receive visas. When applying for visas, such persons must submit a letter of invitation from representatives of a registered religious organization in the country to the commission, which may then issue a letter of approval to be submitted with the visa request. The commission stated that its review process takes less than a week. Registered religious groups reported that applications were reviewed quickly, and there were no reports of applications being denied. 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. At the end of the previous reporting period, the Ministry of Education announced plans to develop a new course entitled "Ethics of Religion" for the 2009-10 school year, asking students/parents to choose between history of religions and ethics of religion. A previous religious course had been ruled unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. The new course was not implemented in 2009, but the Ministry of Education announced it would be implemented for the 2010-11 school year, with the second option being "Culture of Civilization." Some religious groups expressed concern that children would be separated into different classes based on religion and that no religious courses would be offered for children who are not Orthodox or Muslim.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. However, failure to implement registration procedures effectively for religious groups blocked or delayed the ability of some groups to gain legal status.

Skopje Court II is responsible for registering religious groups under the 2007 law. The law also sets out clear timelines for the court to complete the registration process--15 days for review of completeness of applications and an additional eight days for entering the group into the register. However, applicants reported waiting much longer for the court to issue its rulings. The law requires that the name and official insignia of new groups be different from the names and insignia of already-registered groups, but it allows multiple groups of a single faith to register. The Evangelical Baptist Church changed its registration name to Christian Church Word of God after being rejected because of the existence of a separate Baptist church on the registry. At least three applications for registration from Orthodox groups have been

refused since the law took effect. The dominant MOC remained the sole Orthodox group registered. Religious groups complained of political influence over the registration process.

During the reporting period, the court approved six applicants--Christian Movement New Hope, Kaderiska Religious Group Jenet, Free Evangelical Church Good News, Christian Church Word of God, Reformed Apostolic Church ,and Christian Church Annunciation--and rejected or did not act on applications from five religious communities--Bektashi Community of Macedonia in Tetovo, Greek Orthodox Archbishopric of Patriarchy of Pec (the application name of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid), Church of True Orthodox Christians in Macedonia, Christian Church Oasis, and Ehlibejska Bektashi Community of Macedonia. The Christian Movement New Hope was approved after changing the responsible person on its registration application to a Macedonian citizen.

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Some restrictions related to its status as an unregistered group continued to be applied to the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid, which denies the MOC's self-declared autocephaly, which is also not recognized by other Orthodox churches. Led by a defrocked MOC bishop, Jovan Vraniskovski, this group is recognized by the Serbian Orthodox Church as an archbishopric. Members of the group continued to claim undue government monitoring or harassment based on their religious beliefs.

At the end of the previous reporting period, the government announced that it had transferred the land for a planned Orthodox church on Skopje's main square to the MOC. In February 2010 the government presented a video simulation of planned construction for central Skopje that included the church. The ICM pointed to inclusion of the church, and exclusion of the Burmali mosque, as additional proof that the government favors the Orthodox religious community in construction of houses of worship. This problem, as well as disputes with the government over the right to begin reconstruction of a mosque in Prilep, which had been destroyed during the 2001 conflict, and to begin construction of a mosque in the Bitola village of Lazhec, led the ICM to threaten to boycott the government-sponsored 2nd World Conference on Dialogue among Religions and Civilizations in May 2010. The government and the ICM eventually came to agreement, and the ICM attended the conference.

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.

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. The ICM continued to meet with government officials to seek to resolve property matters.

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.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Jovan Vraniskovski, leader of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid, returned to the country after having spent all of the previous reporting period abroad while facing a detention order, which expired in January 2010. He remained free pending a decision by the appellate court on his appeal of a basic court sentence of 30 months' imprisonment and a fine of \$300,000 (250,000 euros) for embezzlement. Vraniskovski served nine months of a 12-month prison sentence for separate embezzlement charges in 2007 and seven months of an 18-month sentence for inciting religious or ethnic hatred in 2006.

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

The Ministry of Culture, in cooperation with the State Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups, organized the 2nd World Conference on Dialogue among Religions and Civilizations, held May 6-9, 2010, in Ohrid. A total of 480 religious leaders, government officials, academics, and representatives of the international community from more than 40 countries participated. A declaration was adopted pledging the promotion of tolerance and coexistence and supporting interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

In April 2010 parliament passed a new antidiscrimination law to protect against discrimination based on religious beliefs. The law was scheduled to be implemented on January 1, 2011.

#### 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.

On June 25, 2010, at the Isa Beg mosque in Skopje, ICM representatives attempted to block Friday prayer services officiated by Ramadan Ramadani, who had been suspended by the ICM. After the ICM officials, including Ibrahim Shabani, the mufti of Skopje, and Afrim Tahiri, general secretary, left the mosque, there was a brief fight between supporters of the two sides. No arrests were reported.

In January 2010 vandals twice broke windows of a mosque in Kocani. In the same month, unknown persons vandalized three tombs in a Muslim cemetery in Struga.

#### 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.

The ambassador and other U.S. embassy representatives attended the opening ceremonies of the 2nd World Conference on Dialogue among Religions and Civilizations, where the ambassador met with religious leaders and the prime minister and discussed religious dialogue and other religious matters. The embassy also sponsored an academic who specializes in interreligious dialogue and conflict resolution to speak at the conference and meet with religious groups. The ambassador and embassy staff actively engaged with the ICM, the prime minister, and other officials to resolve the dispute between the government and the ICM regarding the building of mosques in Prilep and Lazhec.

The embassy supported a forum on interreligious tolerance at a local university. An embassy officer spoke on interreligious dialogue and tolerance and advocated for full implementation of the 2007 legal status law.

The embassy sponsored an interfaith day of service in cooperation with the Red Cross of the city of Skopje. The event brought together persons of many faiths to work for a blood and food donation drive.

Embassy officials discussed the implementation of the 2007 legal status law with the court in charge of registrations and with government and religious leaders on numerous occasions, advocating for implementation of the law in a way that meets international standards with respect to human rights and religious freedom and meets the deadlines contained in the law. Embassy staff also worked closely with a number of religious groups and communities seeking to register, serving as a central point for sharing information among applicants frustrated by court delays and stymied by the lack of clear application procedures.

The ambassador and other embassy representatives attended events to foster religious freedom, tolerance, and understanding, including Holocaust commemoration events and holiday celebrations by various religious groups.

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