



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Cyprus

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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

The Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

Cyprus has an area of 5,747 square miles, and the population in the Government-controlled areas was estimated at 766,600.

Prior to 1974, the country experienced a long period of strife between its Greek and Turkish Cypriot communities. In response, the U.N. Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) began peacekeeping operations in 1964. The island has been divided 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, Cypriots, as well as foreigners, must show identification at the buffer zone checkpoints to cross from one side to the other.

Approximately 96 percent of the population in the Government-controlled areas belonged to the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus. An estimated 0.7 percent of the remaining population was Maronite, slightly less than 0.4 percent was Armenian Orthodox, 0.1 percent was Latin (Roman Catholic), and 3.2 percent belonged to other groups. The latter category included small groups of Protestants and Jews and immigrants of various religious beliefs, including Muslims and Buddhists.

In July 2005 the first Buddhist temple in Cyprus opened in Nicosia. In September, Cyprus's first new synagogue in at least twenty years opened in Larnaca.

A 1998 opinion poll indicated that an estimated 48 percent of Greek Cypriots regularly attended church services, while 49 percent attended only for major religious holidays and ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. The remainder did not attend religious services at all.

There was some Protestant missionary activity in the Government-controlled area.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution of the Republic of Cyprus provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The 1960 constitution specifies that the 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 law, is required to pay taxes only on strictly commercial activities. Under the 1960 constitution, the same applies to the Vakf, or Evkaf, the Muslim institution that regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots and which operates only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

Three other religious groups are recognized in the 1960 constitution: Armenian Orthodox, Maronite Christians, and Latins (Roman Catholics). These groups also are exempt from taxes and are eligible, along with the Church of Cyprus and the Vakf, for government subsidies to their religious institutions.

The Government of Cyprus has constitutional or 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.

Religions other than the five recognized religions are not required to register with the authorities; however, if they desire to engage in financial transactions, such as maintaining a bank account, they must register as a nonprofit company. To register, a group must submit an application through an attorney that states the purpose 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 of their activities. Registration is granted promptly, and many religious groups are recognized. No religious groups were denied registration during the reporting period.

There are no prohibitions against missionary activity or proselytizing in the Government-controlled areas. Foreign missionaries must obtain and periodically renew residence permits in order to live in the country; normally, renewal requests are not denied.

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 exempted from attending religious services and instruction. In the past, however, some Jehovah's Witnesses parents reported that their children were not excused from all religious instruction.

In February 2006 the Ministry of Education announced that it was preparing a proposal to reduce the number of hours of religious instruction required in public schools from two hours to one hour per week. The Church of Cyprus and other religious organizations strongly objected. The ministry promised that no new regulations would be adopted without appropriate debate and discussion.

The Government of Cyprus recognizes the following holy days as national holidays: Epiphany, Annunciation, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Holy Spirit Day, Assumption Day, and Christmas.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion in Cyprus. In 2001, however, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Government of Turkey was responsible for imposing restrictions on the movement of Greek Cypriots in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots, which limited their access to places of worship.

Since 2003, when restrictions of movement were relaxed, Greek Cypriots have reported relatively easy access to Apostolos Andreas Monastery and other religious sites in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. Likewise, Turkish Cypriots enjoyed relatively easy access to religious sites, including Hala Sultan Tekke in the Government-controlled area.

Missionaries have the legal right to proselytize, but the Government closely monitors 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. In the past there were occasional apprehensions but no arrests under these laws.

Members of Jehovah's Witnesses 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.

In May 2006 a nongovernmental organization (NGO) reported that it had filed complaints with the Ombudsman's Office and the independent body formed in April to investigate the police regarding police treatment of Muslim asylum seekers.

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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. There were polite relations between the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and the other religious communities in the Government-controlled area.

In April 2005 a Turkish Cypriot cemetery in Larnaca, which had recently been rehabilitated as part of a U.S.-funded project aimed at improving bi-communal relations, was vandalized. In 2005, there were also reports of Turkish Cypriot cemeteries in the Government-controlled area being destroyed for the construction of roads and other development.

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

The Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus is suspicious of any attempts to proselytize among Greek Cypriots and closely monitors such activities. Religion is a prominent component of Greek Cypriot society, with considerable long-standing cultural and political influence. During the 1950s, the head of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus, Archbishop Makarios III, led the Greek Cypriot campaign for independence and served as president from independence in 1960 until his death in 1977. While the preeminent position of the Church of Cyprus has been somewhat reduced in recent years, it remains an important power center in politics. As the largest owner of real estate in Cyprus and the operator of several large business enterprises, the Church of Cyprus is also a significant economic actor. Present-day influence of the Church can be seen in the political messages bishops and priests regularly include in their Sunday sermons. In February 2005, an organization known as the Pancyprian Christian Orthodox Movement, with links to the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus, issued a booklet alleging that clubs such as the Lions, Rotary, and Boy Scouts were "recruiting grounds for Freemasonry" and were thus a danger to Cypriot society.

In March 2005 the Government requested that an additional Church of Cyprus priest be assigned to minister to the Greek Cypriots living in the Karpas region of the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. The enclaved community already had one full-time priest but decided it needed a second. Turkish Cypriot authorities agreed in principle to this request, but the first proposed individual could not go for personal reasons. Turkish Cypriot authorities objected to the second individual who was proposed, claiming he disliked Turkish Cypriots and had made inappropriate statements about their community. Turkish Cypriot authorities asked that the Government nominate a different priest. At the end of the reporting period, the position remained open and the Government had not nominated a new priest.

In November 2005 press reports claimed that the police and the municipality had harassed the Buddhist temple in Strovolos. The municipality allegedly claimed that the temple did not have the proper license to operate as a temple, and police said they visited the site as required by law after receiving numerous anonymous and formal complaints about disturbances. There were also reports that police had visited the Jewish synagogue because of complaints of disturbances soon after its opening.

In November 2005 the Ombudsman's Office issued a report on a complaint from Jehovah's Witnesses whose child was excused from religious instruction but who was subsequently harassed by fellow students and pressured by a religious instructor. The report concluded that the student's complaint was valid and that the instructor's remarks during a lesson on religious sects violated the student's religious freedom.

In May 2006 an NGO reported complaints from recognized political asylees of Muslim origin who had difficulty securing employment because of their religion. Several women reported that potential employers did not like their headscarves. Another asylee alleged that he could not secure housing because he was a Muslim.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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

The ambassador and other embassy officers meet periodically with Greek Cypriot religious authorities regarding specific religious freedom concerns.

AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Since 1974, the northern part of Cyprus has been governed by a Turkish Cypriot administration that 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 refers specifically to a "secular republic" and provides for freedom of religion, and Turkish Cypriot authorities generally respected this right in practice. The politically divisive environment of Cyprus, however, engendered some restrictions on religious freedom, particularly for Greek Cypriots and Maronites.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period, and Turkish Cypriot policies continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, there were a few reports of vandalism of religious sites and cemeteries.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

Approximately 250,000 persons lived in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. An estimated 99 percent of Turkish Cypriots was at least nominally Muslim. There was a small Turkish Cypriot Baha'i community. Most other non-Muslims in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots were foreigners from Western Europe who were generally members of the Roman Catholic or Anglican churches. Approximately 10 percent of the population in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots attended religious services regularly.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The "TRNC Constitution" provides for freedom of religion, and Turkish Cypriot authorities generally respected this right in practice.

The "TRNC Constitution" does not recognize any specific religion. It does state, however, that the Vakf or Evkaf, 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 Vakf laws and principles. The Vakf is tax-exempt in its religious activities, but its commercial operations are subject to the applicable taxes. The Vakf also receives official subsidies. No other religious organization is tax-exempt or receives subsidies. The Vakf 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, this agreement provides for facilities for religious worship.

Religious organizations are not required to register with Turkish Cypriot 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 in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. There is no formal Islamic religious instruction in public schools, and there are no state-supported religious schools.

Turkish Cypriot authorities do not sponsor any interfaith activity.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Greek Cypriots and Maronites were prohibited from visiting religious sites located in military zones in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. Greek Cypriots and Maronites were allowed to worship at only seven sites designated by the Turkish military in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots.

Turkish Cypriot authorities once again gave permission for an Orthodox service to be held in Agias Mamas Church near the town of Guzelyurt/Morphou on September 1 and 2, 2005. In 2004, a bomb exploded in the doorway of the church during the service. During the September 2005 service, two Greek Cypriots' cars were burned in the parking lot. Turkish Cypriots maintained the fire was due to an electrical problem, but Greek Cypriot forensic tests indicated arson.

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

In the area administered by Turkish Cypriots there are few non-Muslims, and no noticeable friction between them and the Muslim population.

Greek Cypriots report that unused Orthodox Church of Cyprus churches and cemeteries in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots continued to be robbed and vandalized, and the Government maintained its claim that Orthodox Church of Cyprus icons had been smuggled out of the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. In February 2005, a Greek Cypriot cemetery near Lapta/Lapithos, which had recently been rehabilitated as part of a U.S.-funded project aimed at improving bi-communal relations, was vandalized. In May 2005, Turkish Cypriot media alleged that a Greek Cypriot church committee had taken a religious icon across the buffer zone (or green line) into the Government-controlled area.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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