



Hungary

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. There is no state religion; however, the four "historic religions" (Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Jewish) and certain other denominations, such as Unitarian and Orthodox churches, enjoy some privileges not extended to other religious groups.

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. However, several points of friction between the Government and religious organizations developed during the period covered by this report concerning recent laws affecting church-run social institutions.

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

The country has an area of 35,919 square miles and a population of approximately 10 million.

The 2001 national census, the latest demographic survey available, contained an optional question on religious affiliation, and 90 percent of the population provided a response. According to the census results, 55 percent of citizens were Roman Catholic, 15 percent were members of the Reformed Church, 3 percent were members of the Lutheran Church, and less than 1 percent were Jewish. These four faiths comprised the country's historic religious groups. Three percent of respondents identified themselves as Greek Catholics, and 15 percent of respondents declared no religious affiliation. The remainder was divided among a number of other denominations. The largest of these was the Congregation of Faith, a local evangelical Christian movement. Other denominations included a broad range of Christian groups, including five Orthodox denominations. In addition, there were seven Buddhist groups and three Islamic communities. Citizens were able to donate 1.0 percent of their income to the religious group of their choice. Statistics on tax revenue voluntarily directed by individual taxpayers for use by religious groups confirmed previous official estimates of religious affiliation.

Foreign representatives from a variety of religious groups and missionary organizations, mainly Christian, were active in the country. These representatives were not subject to government regulation or interference.

Strict enforcement of data protection regulations impeded the collection of official statistics on popular participation in religious life; however, surveys and other evidence suggested that the country's citizens were less devout than the average central European. According to a 2004 survey by the Economic Research Institute of Hungary (GFK), 58 percent of respondents declared themselves to be "believers," and 55 percent responded that they believe in "God or the supernatural." Only 15 percent of those believers declared that they attended religious services at least once a week, and 25 percent stated that they never did.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution 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 1990 Law on the Freedom of Conscience regulates the activities of and the benefits enjoyed by religious communities and establishes the criteria for legal designation. To register, religious groups must submit a statement to a county court declaring that they have at least one hundred followers. The court determines whether the registration of the new group complies with constitutional and legal requirements; these requirements were very loose and registration was essentially pro forma. While any group is free to practice its faith, formal registration makes available certain protections and privileges and grants access to several forms of state funding. In 2005, eight new religious groups were registered by the courts. As of May 2006, there were a total of 146 registered religious groups.

Religious instruction is not part of the curriculum in public schools; however, the Government permits primary and secondary school students to enroll in extracurricular religious education classes. Optional religious instruction is usually held after the normal school day and is taught in school facilities by representatives of religious groups. While the Government makes provisions for minority religions to engage in religious education in public schools, the four historic religions provide the majority of after-hours religious instruction. During the 2005-2006 school

year, 46 registered religious groups provided religious instruction to 492,065 students in public schools.

In addition to taxpayer contributions, the Government allocates public funds to registered religions. The Government supplements taxpayer contributions to registered religions in proportion to individual contributions. In 2005, this supplementary funding amounted to \$58 million (HUF 12.4 billion). Further funding is provided for a range of activities such as the maintenance of public art collections, the reconstruction and renovation of religious institutions, support for religious instruction, compensation for non-restituted religious property and assistance to church personnel serving the smallest villages. In 2005, this amounted to nearly \$120 million (HUF 25.8 billion). The Government also provided financial support for church-run social services and schools on the same level as it does for state-run institutions. This form of support amounted to an estimated \$290 million (HUF 62.4 billion) for 2005.

Easter Monday, Whit Monday, All Saints' Day, and Christmas are celebrated as national holidays. These holidays did not negatively affect any religious groups.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. While there are several laws that grant rights and privileges to the historic religions, such as per-capita funding for church-run universities, the Government showed steady improvement over the last several years in extending these rights and privileges to every religious group.

In June 2005, the Supreme Court ruled that a statement adopted by the Theology Faculty Council of a Reformed Church University did not violate the provisions of the law on equal treatment, despite the University's proscription on training homosexuals for the priesthood or for religious teaching positions. The judgment noted that since this form of instruction is inseparable from the Church's moral and religious beliefs, it falls within religious freedom of the Church, and the state can not pass legal judgment on it.

In May 2006, the Data Protection Ombudsman published an open letter in which he expressed his concerns over the manner in which the Scientology Church handles the data it records about its members, particularly with the use of the so-called e-meter. Examples of the shortcomings the ombudsman observed were that the Church was not sufficiently concrete in stating to what end the information is collected and that the waiver signed by members forfeits for all time their right to access information collected on them. The ombudsman called upon the Church to fully conform to the country's data protection laws. In response, a church spokesperson stated that the ombudsman had overstepped his jurisdiction and interfered in the religious freedom of the Church.

The issue of state financial allocation to the various churches for educational and social services continued to be a source of contention in church-state relations. (The Vatican Treaty and several 1997 agreements obligate the Government to provide the same amount of per-capita funding to church-run social institutions as it does to public institutions, such as schools and old-age homes.) In August 2005, a dispute arose between the Ministry of Youth, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity (ICSSZEM), and some of the historical Christian churches over state support of the churches' homes for the elderly. The ICSSZEM minister noted a growing trend among local governments to pass responsibility for retirement homes to the churches, which, according to an interpretation of the Hungarian-Vatican Concordat, are able to secure more funding for these homes from central funds. According to the ICSSZEM minister, these financially motivated actions place a huge burden on the ministry's budget and warrant consideration of modifying the Concordat.

After a September 2005 meeting at the Vatican, the minister of foreign affairs stated that the Government had no intention of modifying the existing Concordat. However, he did recommend adding appendices to clarify the calculation of how much state financing is owed to the churches for various activities.

In early December 2005, leaders of all four historic churches jointly called upon the Government to modify the draft 2006 budget to eliminate what they perceived as discriminatory per capita funding for the public service institutions they operate, particularly schools. On December 16, schools run by two of the historic Christian churches staged a protest demonstration, calling on the Government to fully equalize the funding. Although the called-for budget modification was not forthcoming, subsequent negotiations with the Government appeared to settle most of the churches' concerns. In April 2006, three opposition politicians submitted a complaint to the Constitutional Court alleging that the 2006 budget discriminated against church-run public services with respect to central budget financing and thus violated the 1997 Concordat. The court had not ruled on the case by the end of the period covered by this report.

The military chaplain service has permanent pastoral representation by the four historic religions in the defense forces. The Government also requires the military to respect the rights of other religions by providing pastoral care for their members. The Ministry of Defense funds and maintains the chaplain service. There is no evidence that soldiers receive preferential treatment for either foregoing or using the service. The Ministry of Justice regulates a similar system for the provision of religious services to prisoners.

Leaders of the Roman Catholic and Reformed churches also complained that state financing of the maintenance of public art collections and other public services for which the churches were responsible was being delayed. In August, the Government acknowledged the delays, attributed them to technical difficulties, and promised that all apportioned funding would be transferred by fall 2006.

Religious groups and the Government agreed on a number of properties to be returned and an amount of monetary compensation to be paid for properties that could not be returned. These agreements were subsumed under the 1991 Compensation Law, which requires the Government to compensate religious groups for properties confiscated by the Government after January 1, 1946. Overall 7,572 claims were made by religious groups for property restitution under the 1991 Compensation Law: 2,695 cases were rejected as inapplicable under the law; the Government decided to return property in 1,897 cases and gave cash payments in another 1,953 cases; and 1,027 cases were resolved directly between former and present owners without government intervention. Real estate cases have involved twelve religious groups: Roman Catholic, Reformed, Lutheran, Unitarian, Baptist, Romanian Orthodox, Hungarian Orthodox, Budai Serb Orthodox,

Hungarian Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, the Salvation Army, and the Confederation of Hungarian Jewish Communities (Mazsihisz). While these agreements primarily address property issues and restitution, they also have provisions requiring the Government to support religious organizations that provide social services as well as support for the preservation of religious monuments.

In 2005, the Government adopted a resolution making it possible to fast-track property restitution negotiations and close outstanding claims in 2006, instead of by 2011 as the original law set forth. Three churches made use of this new procedure, resulting in the settlement of a further 435 church properties by March 2006. The Catholic Church resolved 430 claims with a value of \$112 million (HUF 24.1 billion), leaving only three property cases outstanding. Mazsihisz resolved its final three outstanding claims and the Budai Serb Orthodox Church also closed the restitution process by resolving its two outstanding claims. Members of the Jewish community viewed the restitution process as generally fair but wanted to see compensation paid for the estimated \$2 to \$16 billion (HUF 430 to 3,440 billion) worth of heirless Jewish properties specifically excluded from the restitution process. Neither the Reformed nor the Lutheran churches opted for the fast-track procedure. Between them and the Catholic Church a total of 310 property claims remain to be settled by 2011.

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.

Anti-Semitism

The Jewish community stated that there were fewer acts of vandalism in Jewish cemeteries than in previous years. Concerning those incidents of vandalism that did occur, Jewish community leaders attributed most of them to youths, and did not consider the incidents anti-Semitic.

Representatives of the Jewish community expressed concern over anti-Semitism in some media outlets, in society, and in coded political speech. The weekly newspaper Magyar Demokrata continued to publish anti-Semitic articles as did the more radical weekly Magyar Forum. Anti-Semitism figured in the spring 2006 election campaign of the small but vocal far-right wing party MIEP-Jobbik.

The Jewish community also expressed concerns that the Hungarian Soccer Federation was not doing enough to curb anti-Semitic outbursts among the core fans of a few of the country's soccer clubs.

There were no developments in the police investigation of the June 2005 vandalization of the largest Jewish cemetery in Budapest, and observers doubt that it will produce any concrete results.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government continued its strong efforts to combat anti-Semitism by clearly speaking out against the use of coded speech by right-wing extremists, and the prime minister publicly stated that Hungarians also bear responsibility for the Holocaust.

On April 16, 2006, the speaker of Parliament attended the annual Hungarian Holocaust Remembrance Day gathering at Budapest's Holocaust Memorial Center.

In March 2006, Hungary took over chairmanship of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. The minister of education represented the Government in the position of chairman.

Responding in part to pressure from the Jewish community, in March 2006, the minister of health ordered that the name of Bela Johan be removed from the title of the National Epidemiology Center and that the bust of Johan be taken down. Johan was a state secretary in the Ministry of Interior in the early 1940s, and although certain public health achievements are tied to his name, he was also actively complicit in the drafting and execution of a number of anti-Jewish measures. The Jewish community welcomed the move.

On February 13, 2006, Parliament passed Act LXVII of 2006, which reopened the window for compensation claims from those individuals whose immediate relatives were killed in the Holocaust. Eligible individuals may apply for a lump sum or pension worth up to \$1,860 (HUF 400,000) for each parent, sibling, or child who was killed. The act took effect on March 31 and was scheduled to expire on July 31, 2006.

After nearly two years of operation, Budapest's Holocaust Memorial Center, a state-financed institution, opened its permanent exhibition in February 2006.

On January 27, 2006, the prime minister, president, and a host of public figures commemorated the UN-adopted Holocaust Remembrance Day, also the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp. In his speech, the prime minister drew attention to the fact that Hungarians were both victims of and accomplices in the Holocaust.

During an October 2005 visit to the United States, Prime Minister Gyurcsany visited the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and attended Hungarian-Jewish community events in the United States.

In an effort to strengthen ties with all religious groups, the minister of culture made regular visits to a host of smaller religious communities not included among the four historic churches. Since his inauguration in February 2005, the minister visited, among others, Buddhist, Krishna, Baptist, Methodist, and other nontraditional religious groups.

During the period covered by this report, the Office of the Prime Minister worked directly with representatives of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to ensure access to Holocaust-era archives.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationships among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom, and there was little friction between religions. During the reporting period, Christian churches and the Jewish community continued to organize regular events under the auspices of the Christian-Jewish Society, which brings together religious academics for discussions. Religious groups also demonstrated a great willingness to work together across a wide range of other areas in order to achieve common social or political goals.

Overall, society welcomed the increasing religious activity that followed the transition from communism. However, lingering effects of the Communist Party's suppression of religion remain. Officials from Christian churches continued to contend that it will be another generation at least before a majority of citizens realize that religion has a vital role to play in the nation's public life.

Church leaders report that the divisive political climate in the country affects societal attitudes toward religion, as church statements on important public issues tend to be seen as politically motivated. Politicians on the left have routinely criticized the churches for their perceived political support for the right ever since the regime change of 1989. This political tension was manifest in the present reporting period during the spring parliamentary elections, in which a few Christian parishes openly campaigned for the political right, although there were no directions from church leaders to do so. Furthermore, in the first months of 2006, historians reportedly found documents linking present and former leaders of the Catholic Church to the communist-era secret service. The Church, while not fully denying the charges, suggested that the timing of the revelations, which occurred before the elections, was politically motivated.

Reports of vandalism or destruction of Christian and Jewish property exhibited a downward trend, as did burglaries involving places of worship. In 2005, the National Police reported 216 cases of vandalism to cemeteries, as compared to 339 in 2004, and 125 cases of burglary involving places of worship as compared to 148 in 2004. There was no information on which churches owned the cemeteries. Most police and religious authorities considered these incidents to be acts of youth vandalism and not indications of religious intolerance.

In September 2005, an unknown person or persons placed a number of anti-Islamic posters around Budapest. Police did not initiate an investigation, citing freedom of speech. The incident received little attention in the media at the time. There was no measurable public reaction as the incident was minor and isolated and the Muslim community in the country is quite small.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom activities, maintaining regular contact with government officials, members of Parliament, leaders of large and small religious groups, and representatives of local and international nongovernmental organizations that address issues of religious freedom. Through these contacts, embassy officers tracked closely the dispute over parochial school funding and the possible effect on clergy that the country's proposed lustration legislation may have. Embassy officers also worked with Mazsihisz to identify Jewish cemeteries for possible restoration by the U.S. Commission to Preserve America's Cultural Heritage Abroad (USCPACHA). In September 2005, the embassy facilitated a visit from a USCPACHA official to survey three cemeteries for possible restoration.

During the period covered by this report, the embassy facilitated the transfer of Holocaust-era records to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and it lobbied the Government at the highest levels for greater archival access for the museum.

The embassy also remained active on issues of compensation and property restitution for Holocaust victims. Embassy officers worked with Mazsihisz, the Hungarian Jewish Public Foundation, other local and international Jewish organizations, members of Parliament, and the Prime Minister's Office to maintain dialogue on restitution issues, and to promote fair compensation.

The embassy continued to urge the Government to speak out against anti-Semitism and hate speech.

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