Macedonia

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

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. However, the law places some limits on religious practice by restricting the registration of religious organizations.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. The ongoing dispute between the Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox Churches remained unresolved.

U.S. embassy representatives discussed the draft "Law on the Legal Status of a Church, Religious Community, and Religious Group" with government and religious leaders on numerous occasions and urged all parties to support a law that meets international standards with respect to human rights and religious freedom.

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 religious groups are Orthodox Christianity and Islam. There is a general correlation between ethnicity and religion. The majority of Orthodox believers are ethnic Macedonian, and the majority of Muslim believers are ethnic Albanian. Approximately 65 percent of the population is Macedonian Orthodox, 32 percent is Muslim, 1 percent is Roman Catholic, and 2 percent follow other religious beliefs (largely various Protestant denominations). There is also a small Jewish community, most of whose members reside in Skopje.

Foreign missionaries are active in the country.

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. However, the law places some limits on religious practices, including restricting the registration of religious organizations, the establishment of places of worship, the collection of contributions, and locations where religious rites may be held. The law provides for penalties against any person or group that restricts a citizen's right to join a religious organization or participate in religious rituals. The Constitution recognizes the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC), the Islamic community, the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and the Methodist Church as "religious communities." All other registered religious organizations are considered to be "religious groups."

The 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups further defines the constitutional provision for religious freedom. It establishes the procedure for religious organizations to register and prohibits the registration of more than one organization for each religious confession. The law specifies that religious organizations must be registered to perform religious ceremonies, obtain permits to erect religious buildings, or request visas for foreigners coming to the country to undertake religious work. In 1998 and 1999, the Constitutional Court struck down several provisions of the 1997 law, which has resulted in considerable confusion over which provisions are still enforceable. In practice the law was not enforced consistently.

Regulations require that foreigners entering the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites obtain approval from the State Commission for Relations with the Religious Communities and Groups to receive a visa. When applying for
visits, such persons must submit a letter of invitation from representatives of a religious organization in the country to the commission, which then issues a letter of approval to be submitted with the visa request.

The law places some restrictions on the locations where religious ceremonies may be held. It provides that religious rites and religious activities "shall take place at churches, mosques, and other temples, and in gardens that are parts of those facilities; at cemeteries; and at other facilities of the religious group." Provision is made for holding services in other places, provided that a permit is obtained from the State Commission for Relations with the Religious Communities and Groups at least 15 days in advance. No permit or permission is required to perform religious rites in a private home. The law also states that religious activities "shall not violate the public peace and order, and shall not disrespect the religious feelings and other freedoms and rights" of other citizens.

The law also places some limitations on the collection of contributions by restricting it to places where religious rites and activities are conducted; however, these provisions of the law were not enforced.

Orthodox Easter and Christmas and Ramazan Bajram (end of Ramadan) are observed as national holidays. Other Christian, Islamic, and Jewish holidays are not national holidays, but they are government-designated religious holidays for adherents of those faiths.

Education laws restrict the establishment of all private primary schools, including parochial schools, and do not allow parents to homeschool their children. However, there are no restrictions placed on religious education that takes place in religious spaces such as churches and mosques. Children below the age of 10 years may not receive religious instruction without the permission of their parents or legal guardians.

On April 16, 2007, Parliament adopted amendments to the law on education to allow for religious education in public schools starting in the 6th year of primary school, when students are approximately 12 years old. Religious instruction is not mandatory. Parents and the student must give consent and specify which religious instruction they wish to receive. The law does not limit the type or number of religious beliefs that can be taught. Courses were to range from religious practice to history of religion and ethics. The new amendments were scheduled to be implemented starting in the 2008-09 academic year.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. However, restrictions contained in the Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups continued to be applied to a group known as the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid," which denies the MOC's self-declared autocephaly (also not recognized by other Orthodox churches). Led by a defrocked MOC bishop, Jovan Vraniskovski, this schismatic group is recognized by the Serbian Orthodox Church as an archbishopric; however, the group continues to exist in the country as an unregistered group after the State Commission for Relations with the Religious Communities and Groups rejected its application in 2004 and the Supreme Court rejected the group's appeal in 2005. Members of the group claimed undue government monitoring or harassment based on their religious beliefs.

The commission did not receive any new applications for the registration of a religious group during the period covered by this report. On January 10, 2007, the Supreme Court upheld a 2006 decision by the commission to reject the application of the Reformist Movement of Adventists. The commission cited a number of grounds for the denial, including that under the law only one group may be registered for each confession. The commission used similar arguments to deny the 2006 application of the Free Protestant Movement. The group's legal appeal was under consideration by the Supreme Court at the end of the period covered by this report.

Churches and mosques often are built without the appropriate building permits; however, the Government normally does not take action against religious groups that build structures without permits. In the past, several Protestant groups were unable to obtain building permits for new church facilities, often because of bureaucratic complications that affect all new construction, religious or secular. Some local human rights organizations stated that religious organizations who reported trouble obtaining building permits often had not followed the proper legal procedures for obtaining a permit. However, members of Jehovah's Witnesses alleged that government officials discriminated against their religious group by refusing to issue a building permit even though the group is officially registered and the proper documentation was provided.

The problem of restitution of religious properties expropriated by the former Yugoslav government was not fully resolved. Many religious communities had extensive grounds or other properties expropriated by the communist regime, and they have not regained full ownership of many of the properties. Ownership of almost all churches and many mosques has been restored to the appropriate religious community, but that was not the case for most of the other properties. Restitution or compensation claims are complicated by the fact that the seized properties have changed hands many times and have been developed. The Islamic Community of Macedonia (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 questioning the historical legal claim of the ICM to religious properties. The ICM and the MOC cited greater difficulty in obtaining ownership of previously owned property if the property was located in a desirable location for investors or business owners, often in urban areas.

The Jewish community continued to work with the Government for the full restitution of individual property confiscated by the former Yugoslav government. The 2000 Law on Denationalization established a system for community and individual property restitution and a fund that regulates restitution for Holocaust victims without heirs. The Jewish community is the only religious group whose community property has been fully restituted. However, the process of individual property restitution continued to be slow, in large part because of the extensive documentation required to show the chain of ownership and lack of heirs. Construction of a Memorial Holocaust Center for the Jews from Macedonia, initiated in 2005 with property and funds restituted in accordance with the Denationalization Law, slowed considerably beginning in late 2006.

The Bektashi, a Sufi Islamic group, sued the Government for failing to reverse the former Yugoslavia's nationalization of the Bektashi's Tetovo compound, known as the Arabati Baba Tekke. The Bektashi also filed suit against the ICM, armed members of which seized part of the complex in 2002. At the end of the period covered by this report, the ICM continued to occupy the area. The ICM claimed that the property belonged to them, since the Bektashi are a "sect" of Islam; however, the Bektashi are registered as a separate religious group and alleged that the property belonged strictly to the Bektashi community and not the Islamic community as a whole. The dispute continued at the end of the reporting period.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

On April 25, 2007, Jovan Vraniskovski, leader of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid," was released from prison after serving 9 months of a 12-month sentence for embezzlement. He began serving the sentence on August 8, 2006, after being convicted of embezzling $72,000 (€54,000) donated to the MOC. Vraniskovski continued to claim that he did not embezzle the money and that the conviction was a result of discrimination against him for his religious beliefs. On February 22, 2007, the Veles trial court accepted Vraniskovski's appeal for an early release due to good behavior. Vraniskovski was free at the end of the period covered by this report and did not face further imprisonment. Following his release from prison, a representative of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" said that government officials continued to refuse to return Vraniskovski's passport.

On April 10, 2007, Vraniskovski was acquitted for a second time on a separate charge involving $410,000 (€324,000) allegedly embezzled from MOC funds while he was still a bishop with the MOC. Vraniskovski previously had served 7 months of an 18-month prison sentence on a 2004 conviction for "inciting religious or ethnic hatred." A 2006 Supreme Court decision reduced the sentence to time served and suspended a separate sentence for "falsely assuming religious authority." The 18-month sentence was based on charges that Vraniskovski held private religious services in union with the Serbian Orthodox Church and that he was responsible for the content of a religious calendar describing the MOC as "the last fortress of communism" and its believers as heretics. The suspended sentence resulted from charges that in 2003 Vraniskovski allegedly baptized a relative in an MOC church near Bitola. Authorities claimed his act constituted trespassing and "falsely assuming religious authority," since earlier he had been defrocked by the MOC and therefore was not authorized to perform religious rites in that church.

In December 2006 Jehovah's Witnesses reported that police harassed a number of their members in the town of Kichevo. The incidents were brought to the attention of officials in the central offices of the Ministry of Interior, who worked with the local police and members of the religious group; the result was the first-ever visit by the Director of the State Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups to the group's headquarters in Skopje. Leaders in the Jehovah's Witnesses community reported that the situation was resolved satisfactorily.

While in prison Jovan Vraniskovski was considered by some human rights organizations to be a religious prisoner. There were no additional 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

Jewish leaders reported a number of instances in which unidentified persons sprayed graffiti containing Nazi content or
symbols in the towns of Skopje, Bitola, and Stip. Authorities promptly responded to the incidents and believed that the perpetrators were not part of an organized group but likely were young individuals acting on their own.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

After taking office in September 2006, the Government increased efforts to reach out to different religious communities. Specific examples included high-level government attendance at various religious ceremonies and events and increased communication with religious communities, predominately through the State Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were isolated reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. On May 20, 2007, unidentified perpetrators set fire to a mosque in Obednik, a small southwestern village. The fire caused little damage, and local authorities believed the perpetrators were not from the village. The act was an isolated case and did not appear to be an organized effort. The Islamic and Orthodox communities publicly condemned the attack.

The Bektashi reported that on March 21, 2007, a large photograph at the entrance to the Arabati Baba Tekke compound was vandalized and a number of plants and trees on the grounds of the compound were destroyed. Police investigated the incident, found the perpetrators, and reportedly increased police presence at the compound.

On February 10, 2007, Bishop Marko, a member of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid," was performing a religious ceremony at a public cemetery in Bitola when two members of a security firm, allegedly employed by MOC priests, pressured him to leave the cemetery. Marko refused, and the security guards physically assaulted him and destroyed his religious censer. Local police were called and reportedly also told Marko to leave, on the grounds that the cemetery was MOC property.

There continued to be isolated reports of vandalism at Macedonian Orthodox churches. The MOC considered these acts to be incidents of petty theft and did not believe that they were motivated by religious beliefs or discrimination.

The continued denial of the MOC's autocephaly by the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" and the Serbian Orthodox Church at times provoked angry responses by the public, press, and Government, who viewed this rejection as an attack on the country's national identity.

Contrary to the previous year, no students affiliated with Vraniskovski's group reported that they were asked to leave the Orthodox theology school in Skopje.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives frequently met with government officials and also with leaders and representatives of the various religious communities to address religious freedom issues and support the Government's policy of ethnic and religious tolerance. Embassy representatives discussed the draft law on religion with government and religious leaders on numerous occasions and urged all parties to support a law meeting international standards with respect to human rights and religious freedom.

The Ambassador and other embassy representatives continued to follow developments in the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" case and discussed the matter with the President, Prime Minister, MOC officials, and representatives of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid." Embassy officials urged respect for religious freedom and the rule of law, as well as moderation in language on both sides.

The Ambassador attended events to foster religious freedom, tolerance, and understanding, including Holocaust commemoration events.

Released on September 14, 2007

International Religious Freedom Report Home Page