Macedonia

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 was no overall change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The absence of provocative actions by state and nonstate actors, and ongoing government efforts to consolidate a unitary, multiethnic state helped foster a climate of general respect for religious freedom. However, the law places some limits on religious practice by restricting the registration of religious groups. During the period covered by this report, these restrictions were applied to a small group aligned with the Serbian Orthodox Church, which denies the ecclesiastical independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

The generally amicable relationship among the various religious groups contributed to religious freedom. However, the ongoing dispute between the Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox churches has intensified in recent years after the Serbian Orthodox Church rejected the legitimacy of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and instead recognized a small splinter group as the "only canonical" church in Macedonia. The Serbian government was found to have financially supported this group, known as the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid." The Government, with general support from the majority of the public, openly sided with the Macedonian Orthodox Church in the long-running dispute.

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 9,781 square miles and a population of 2,071,200. The country's two major religions were Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Nominally, 65 percent of the population was Macedonian Orthodox, 32 percent was Muslim, 1 percent was Roman Catholic, and 2 percent was of other faiths (largely various Protestant denominations). There was also a small Jewish community, with the majority of its members residing in Skopje. Public participation in religious activities centered on major holidays, weddings, and funerals.

Numerous foreign missionaries were active and represented a wide range of faiths. Many of these missionaries entered the country in connection with other work, often charitable or medical. Several Protestant missionary groups and members of Jehovah's Witnesses were active.

There was a general correlation between ethnicity and religion. The majority of Orthodox believers were ethnic Macedonian, and the majority of Muslim believers were ethnic Albanian.

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 the establishment of places of worship, the collection of contributions, and locations where religious rites may be held.

The 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups further defines the constitutional provision for religious freedom. This law designates the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Community, the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish Community, and the Methodist Church as religious communities. All other registered religious associations are considered to be religious groups. In 1998 and 1999, the Constitutional Court struck down several provisions of the 1997 law, including the requirement that religious groups must be registered to perform religious ceremonies. In practice, the remaining provisions were not enforced consistently.

The law requires that religious groups be registered to perform a number of activities. For instance, only registered religious groups may obtain permits to build churches or request visas for foreigners coming to the country to undertake religious work. The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups contained a number of specific requirements for the registration of such groups; the Constitutional Court struck down these requirements in 1999. Consequently, there is considerable confusion over which registration procedures still apply. The law prohibits the registration of more than one group for each religious confession. The law provides for penalties against any person or group that restricts a citizen's right to join a religious group or participate in religious rituals.

Orthodox Easter and Christmas are observed as national holidays. Muslim and Jewish religious holidays are not national holidays, but they
are recognized as required holidays for believers of those faiths.

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

The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups 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 on Relations with the Religious Communities and Groups at least fifteen 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 on Religious Communities and Religious Groups also places some limitations on the collection of contributions by restricting it to places where religious rites and activities are conducted. In practice, these provisions of the law were not enforced.

Education laws restrict the establishment of all private primary schools, including parochial schools. 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 ten years may not receive religious instruction without the permission of their parents or legal guardians.

In May 2005 the Ministry of Justice released a new draft law on religious communities and groups. The draft law proposed a transfer of the responsibility for registering religious groups to the judiciary from the State Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities and Groups. The draft law was submitted to the Ministry of Justice in March 2006. At the end of the reporting period the draft law was under interagency review prior to being submitted to Parliament.

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 Macedonian Orthodox Church's self-declared autocephaly (ecclesiastical independence, which is not recognized by other Orthodox churches). Led by a defrocked Macedonian Orthodox Church Bishop, Zoran Vraniskovski, this schismatic group is recognized by the Serbian Orthodox Church as an archbishopric.

In November 2004 the State Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities denied the registration application of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid." It cited a number of grounds for the denial, noting that under the law only one group may be registered for each confession, and arguing that the name "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" was not sufficiently distinct from that of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, which is also known as the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid and Macedonia. Similar arguments were used to reject three registration applications for small Christian groups using the names "Free Protestant Church," "Good News Church," and "Reformist Movement of Adventists" during the period covered by this report. The appeal to the Supreme Court by the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid," which followed two unsuccessful administrative appeals, was still under consideration at the end of the period covered by this report.

In July 2004, Zoran Vraniskovski, recognized by the Serbian Orthodox Church as Archbishop Jovan of Ohrid, was convicted in a Bitola court of "inciting religious and ethnic hatred." In June 2005, an appeals court upheld the verdict and Vraniskovski reported to prison in July 2005. In February 2006, the Supreme Court reduced his sentence to time served, and he was released from prison in March 2006. Following his release from prison, a representative of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" told an embassy official that government officials had refused to return Vraniskovski's passport. Government officials cited his pending sentence for embezzlement as the reason for refusing to return his passport.

The February 2006 Supreme Court decision also suspended Vraniskovski's one-year prison sentence for "falsely assuming religious authority." This conviction stemmed from an incident in 2003, when Vraniskovski attempted to baptize his niece at a Macedonian Orthodox Church, which is also known as the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid and Macedonia. Similar arguments were used to reject three registration applications for small Christian groups using the names "Free Protestant Church," "Good News Church," and "Reformist Movement of Adventists" during the period covered by this report. The appeal to the Supreme Court by the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid," which followed two unsuccessful administrative appeals, was still under consideration at the end of the period covered by this report.

In addition to these charges, Vraniskovski faced two charges of embezzlement. The first charge was for embezzling $72,000 (57,000 euros) donated to the Macedonian Orthodox Church. In September 2005, the local Veles Court found him guilty of misappropriating funds and sentenced him to two years in prison. In March 2006, the Skopje Appeals Court reduced this sentence to one year, taking into account his return of the money to the Church as a mitigating circumstance. Vraniskovski appealed this decision to the Supreme Court, and no decision had been made by June 2006. In May 2006, media reported that Vraniskovski had traveled to Belgrade to meet with Serbian Orthodox Church officials. This caused speculation in the media that Vraniskovski had obtained Serbian citizenship, as the Government was still in possession of his Macedonian passport, as mentioned above. Vraniskovski was summoned to report to prison by June 19, 2006, to serve the reduced sentence in the embezzlement case. However, he did not report by the specified date, and media reported that Vraniskovski was admitted to a Belgrade hospital on June 26 because of "deteriorated health." By the end of the period covered by this report, Vraniskovski had not reported to prison, and the police had not issued a warrant for his arrest.

In April 2006 Vraniskovski was acquitted on the second embezzlement charge involving $410,000 (324,000 euros) allegedly taken from Macedonian Orthodox Church funds while he was still a bishop with the Macedonian Orthodox Church.
In May 2006 local media reported that the Serbian Orthodox Church had appealed to President Crvenkovski to pardon Vraniskovski as a condition for resuming talks between the Macedonian and Serbian Orthodox churches. In June 2006, media reported that Crvenkovski had rejected this appeal, citing the damaging effect a pardon for the embezzlement conviction would have on the rule of law.

A priest with the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" reported that he was beaten because of his beliefs and that his home, where he performed liturgies, was vandalized in July 2005. Members of the group alleged that, following this incident, police officers discouraged them from reporting future acts of violence or vandalism.

Representatives of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" alleged that in May 2005 police entered a private residence without a warrant, interrupting an Easter service, and asked to see believers' national identification cards. This report could not be independently confirmed. "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" representatives also alleged that in January 2005 at least two of their followers were summoned to the police station in Prilep and were questioned about their support for the group. Complaints regarding the Prilep incident were lodged with the Ministry of Interior's Professional Standards Unit, which, following an investigation, found the police action justified. A secondary school teacher associated with the group in Veles reported that police questioned her students about her teaching, and asked whether she was spreading church propaganda.

Vraniskovski's residence was vandalized in February 2004, and unknown intruders forcibly cut the hair of several nuns present. He claimed the attackers were state agents, but some speculated that his followers staged the attack to generate international sympathy. The alleged intruders were never identified.

The 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups specifically allows foreign citizens to carry out religious activities, but only at the request of a registered religious body and provided the foreign citizen obtains the appropriate visa. During the period covered by this report no visa applications for religious workers were denied; approvals for these visas typically were issued in less than a week.

In September 2004 a Polish-born nun associated with the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" claimed that the Ministry of Interior declined to extend her residency permit because of her affiliation with that group. Since the law prevents registration of more than one group for each confession, the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" has been denied registration and is thus not legally entitled to sponsor foreign religious workers. Followers of the church reported that the nun currently enters the country as a tourist and therefore may not remain in the country continuously for a period longer than ninety days.

Churches and mosques often are built without the appropriate building permits; however, the Government normally does not take action against religious buildings that lack them. In the past, several Protestant groups have been unable to obtain building permits for new church facilities because of bureaucratic complications that affect all new construction, religious or secular. Some local human rights organizations stated that religious groups who reported trouble obtaining building permits often had not followed the proper legal procedures for obtaining a permit.

In October 2004 policemen demolished a small monastery that was being built by members of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" in Nizopole, near Bitola. The organization's lawyer conceded that the monastery was being constructed without a permit but noted that other buildings in the area, also built without permits, were not destroyed. At the end of the period covered by this report, the Organization for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) was unable to obtain a copy of the decision by the competent ministry authorizing the monastery's destruction.

The issue of restitution of religious properties expropriated by the former Yugoslav government had not been fully resolved. Many churches and mosques had extensive grounds or other properties that were expropriated by the communist regime. Some progress was made in restitution of previously state-owned religious property. Almost all churches and many mosques have been returned to the ownership of the appropriate religious community, but that was not the case for most of the other properties. Restitution or compensation claims often are complicated by the fact that the seized properties have changed hands many times or have been developed. The Islamic Community of Macedonia claimed it was not able to regain rightful use of several mosques that the Government was to have returned to it. In addition, the Islamic Community alleged that the Government in some cases delayed the process of restitution by selling or starting new construction on disputed property and questioning the historical legal claim of the Islamic Community to religious properties.

The Jewish community continued to work with the Government for the full restitution of property confiscated by the former Yugoslav government. In 1996, the Jewish Community first submitted a proposal to the Government for restitution of community property. The Law on Denationalization, however, was not passed until 2000, and in 2001 all community property was fully restituted. The agreement included four pieces of property and two buildings in Bitola and one piece of property and a building in Skopje. In addition the community received bonds valued at $3.5 million (2.8 million euros). The Jewish community is the only religious community in Macedonia whose community property has been fully restituted. However, the process of individual property restitution has been slow in large part because of the extensive documentation required to show the chain of ownership and lack of heirs. In 2004, the Holocaust Fund of the Jews from Macedonia, which regulates restitution to individual Holocaust victims without heirs, successfully settled twenty-four cases, returning to the Fund a large piece of property in the old Jewish section of Skopje. In September 2005, construction began on the returned property for a Memorial Holocaust Center for the Jews from Macedonia. There was slow but noticeable progress during the period covered by this report; approximately 450 cases are in the settlement process with the Government, and 1,000 cases remain to be documented and resolved.

The Bektashi, a Sufi Islamic group, sued the Government for failing to reverse the former Yugoslavia's nationalization of the Bektashis' Tetovo compound, known as the Arabati Baba Tekke. The Bektashi also filed suit against the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM), armed members of which seized part of the complex in 2002; the ICM continued to occupy the mosque. The Islamic Community claimed that the property belongs to them, as the Bektashi are a sect of Islam; however, the Bektashi in Macedonia have registered as a separate religious group and claim that the property belongs strictly to the Bektashi Community and not the Islamic community as a whole. These disputes were ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report.
Zoran Vraniskovski was considered by some human rights organizations to be a religious prisoner. He was in prison from July 2005 to March 2006, but was free at the end of the period covered by this report.

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.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The February 2006 Supreme Court decision reducing Zoran Vraniskovski's prison sentence led to his release from prison, after which there were no cases of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Restitution of property according to denationalization laws moved forward. Construction began on a Memorial Holocaust Center on a piece of property restituted to the Jewish community in 2005 using funds from bonds received from the Government.

In May 2006 a dispute over approving the construction of a Catholic church in the village of Sekirnik was resolved when officials from the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, and Government worked together with the citizens of Sekirnik to ensure the proper permits were obtained. Subsequently, construction of the church began unhindered.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom, and prominent religious leaders frequently spoke out in support of pluralism and religious tolerance. However, the continued rejection of the Macedonian Orthodox Church's independence, by the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" and the Serbian Orthodox Church, provoked angry responses by the public, press, and Government, who view this rejection as an attack on the country's national identity.

Religious differences in the country often correspond with ethnic identity. Specifically, most Muslims are ethnic Albanians. However, there are a number of ethnic Macedonians who are Muslim. During the reporting period there were no reports of religious discrimination or prejudice related to ethnic Macedonian Muslims.

Representatives of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" said that a number of their members or sympathizers suffered from discrimination during the reporting period. A student in the theology department in Skopje reported that he was asked to leave the school after attending a Serbian Orthodox liturgy. The school, however, is a private institution run by the Macedonian Orthodox Church, which maintains it has the right to admit or reject students as it sees fit. There was one unverified report that a journalist in Skopje was fired after writing about religious freedom restrictions in the country.

The Bektashi reported two acts of vandalism at the compound in Tetovo. In April 2006, a large photograph of Reshat Bardhi, head of the World Bektashi Community, which hung at the entrance to the compound, was reported stolen. The photograph was replaced and, in May 2006, it was vandalized when the middle of the photograph was cut out. The police investigations into both of these incidents were ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report.

During the period covered by this report, there were isolated reports of Orthodox churches being vandalized. The Macedonian Orthodox Church considered these acts to be incidents of petty theft and did not believe that they were motivated by religious beliefs or discrimination.

Jewish leaders reported that there were no physical or verbal attacks against Jewish persons or property during the period covered by this report.

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.

During the period covered by this report, the ambassador and embassy staff met with leaders and representatives of the various religious communities, as well as with government officials, to address religious freedom issues and to support the Government's policy of ethnic and religious tolerance.

The ambassador and other embassy representatives continued to follow the developments in the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid" case, in coordination with OSCE and the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights. The ambassador and other embassy officials discussed the issue with the president, prime minister, Macedonian Orthodox Church officials, and representatives of the "Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid." On each occasion, the embassy 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, the
enthronement of the new Catholic bishop of Skopje, and a meeting organized by the country’s president to positively engage religious leaders in the 2006 parliamentary elections.

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