



Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Religious Freedom in Albania

Executive Summary

In a country of 3.6 million people, the majority of who do not actively pursue a faith tradition, the Republic of Albania has pursued a course of religious freedom and tolerance that has earned it international praise. The country's Ministry of Cults lists a total of 245 religious groups, organizations and foundations that include the nation's four traditional religions- 2 Christian (Orthodox Christian affiliated to the Autocephalous Church of Albania and Roman Catholicism) and 2 Muslim (Sunni and Bektashi, a group that pursues a liberal form of Shi'a Sufism). According to the 2008 UNHCR report on religious freedom, societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief or practice has been virtually non-existent in Albania.

Institute on Religion and Public Policy

Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. The Institute works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy-makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. The Institute encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

Legal and Policy Framework

In its present Constitution adopted in October, 1998, Albania declared itself as a secular state which "observes the freedom of religious beliefs and creates conditions to exercise it." (Article 7) The State Committee on Cults under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth, and Sports, is charged with regulating relations between the Government and religious communities as well as protecting freedom of religion and promoting inter-religious cooperation and understanding.

Although Albania considers itself a secular republic, the four traditional religious groups enjoy a greater degree of recognition and social status as witnessed by the number of official holidays that favor these four groups.

The government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups; however, the State Committee on Cults maintains records and statistics on foreign religious organizations that contact it for assistance. However registered groups are accorded the right to hold bank accounts, operate religious-affiliated schools and own property but are not eligible for any tax exemptions. In addition, religious movements may acquire the official status of a juridical person by registering with the Tirana District Court under the Law on Nonprofit Organizations, which recognizes the status of a nonprofit association regardless of whether the organization has a cultural, recreational, religious, or humanitarian character.

Under Article 10 of the Constitution separate bilateral agreements to regulate relations between the Government and religious communities have been mandated. But thus far the Catholic Church continued to be the only religious community that had such an agreement with the Government. Negotiations with the other three traditional groups and VUSH, a Protestant umbrella organization, are still in the process of being ratified.

Instances of Official Discrimination

As mentioned above the government has generally respected the rights of religious freedoms in the country. A point of contention that is often raised by religious groups especially the traditional ones has been the issue over compensation for property seized during the turbulent era of the Hoxha regime. While the government has promised to address these claims, many have gone unresolved thus far. For example, the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church included in their restitution claims religious icons and precious manuscripts seized by the communist government that continue to be held in the national archives. Also the Albanian Islamic Community's requests for building a new mosque on land returned to it through the post communist restitution process, is still being considered by the Municipality of Tirana.

Sectarian Instances of Discrimination and Violence

There have been no reports of sectarian conflicts based on religious affiliation, beliefs or practices especially since the signing of a historical agreement between Albania's four traditional religious groups in March 2005. Brokered by the European Council of Religions for Peace, these groups jointly acknowledged their diverse faith traditions, affirmed their shared moral values, and committed themselves to work together to promote a vibrant civil society in Albania.

Positive Trends

The forging of ecumenical ties between Albania's religious groups four years ago to promote religious freedoms has been a major contributor towards keeping violent acts or discrimination from rearing its ugly head in the country.

Conclusion

The Albanian's government pursuit of upholding a secular state committed to religious freedom and the co-operation of the major religious groups towards fostering an atmosphere of dialogue between themselves underscores the relative peace that exists today among the country's sectarian communities.