



Cyprus

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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

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

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in Cypriot 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 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 is estimated at 749,200.

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 governed by a Turkish Cypriot administration. In 1983, that administration proclaimed itself the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (TRNC), although it is not recognized by the United States or any other country except Turkey. A buffer zone patrolled by the 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 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 is Greek Orthodox. An estimated 0.7 percent of the remaining population is Maronite, slightly less than 0.4 percent is Armenian Orthodox, 0.1 percent is Latin (Roman Catholic), and 3.2 percent belong to other groups. The latter category includes small groups of Protestants and foreigners of various religious beliefs.

A 1998 opinion poll indicated that about 48 percent of Greek Cypriots attended regularly 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 is some western 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 respects this right in practice. Turkish Cypriots residing in the south and Greek Cypriots living in the north are allowed to practice their religions freely. The 1960 Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus 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 Greek Orthodox Church is exempt from taxes with regard to religious activity. According to law, the Church is required to pay taxes only on strictly commercial activities.

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

The Government of Cyprus has constitutional or legal bars against religious discrimination. The basic agreement covering treatment of Greek Cypriots and

Maronites living in the north and Turkish Cypriots living in the south remains the 1975 Vienna III Agreement. 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, some Jehovah's Witnesses parents have reported that their children were not excused from all religious instruction. 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. Legal proceedings were initiated in 2002 against several members of Jehovah's Witnesses for failure to appear for reserve duty. Their cases were suspended in November 2002 pending a revision of the law; the cases were unresolved at the end of the reporting period.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In 2001, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the Government of Turkey was responsible for imposing restrictions on Greek Cypriots.

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 north. Likewise, Turkish Cypriots enjoyed relatively easy visits 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. There are occasional apprehensions but there have been no arrests under these laws.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the reporting period.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

There are polite relations between the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and the other religious communities in the south. Greek Cypriots report that unused Orthodox churches and cemeteries in the north continued to be robbed and vandalized, and the Government maintained its claim that Orthodox icons had been smuggled out of the north. In April, a Turkish Cypriot

cemetery in Larnaca, which had recently been rehabilitated as part of a U.S.-funded project aimed at improving bicomunal relations, was vandalized.

The Orthodox Church 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 1950's, 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 has been somewhat reduced in recent years, it remains an important power center in politics. Present day influence of the Church can be seen in the political messages bishops and priests regularly include in their Sunday sermons. In February, an organization known as the Pancyprian Christian Orthodox Movement, with links to the Orthodox Church of Cyprus, issued a booklet alleging that clubs such as the Lions, Rotary and Boy Scouts were "recruiting grounds for Freemasonry," and thus a danger to Cypriot society.

In March, the Government requested that an additional Cypriot Orthodox priest be assigned to minister to the Greek Cypriots living in the Karpas region of the north. The enclaved community already has one full-time priest but decided it needed a second. Turkish Cypriot authorities agreed in principle to this request, but they objected to the 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, a decision was still pending on this issue.

As the largest owner of real estate in the south and the operator of several large business enterprises, the Greek Orthodox Church is a significant economic factor.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the authorities in the context of its overall dialogue and policy to promote human rights.

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

AREAS 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 "TRNC" is not recognized by the United States or any other country except Turkey.

The basic law governing the Turkish Cypriot community refers specifically to a "secular republic" and provides for freedom of religion, and the Turkish Cypriot authorities generally respect this right in practice. The politically divisive environment of Cyprus, however, occasionally affected religious freedom.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the reporting period, 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; however, there were a few reports of vandalism of religious sites and cemeteries.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

Approximately 220,000 persons live in the areas administered by Turkish Cypriots. An estimated 99 percent of the Turkish Cypriot population is at least nominally Muslim. There is a small Turkish Cypriot Baha'i community. Most other non-Muslims in the north are foreigners from Western Europe who are generally members of the Roman Catholic or Anglican Churches. Approximately 10 percent of the population in the north attends religious services regularly.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal Policy Framework

The basic law in the Turkish Cypriot community provides for freedom of religion, and the authorities generally respect this right in practice.

Turkish Cypriots residing in the south and Greek Cypriots living in the north are allowed to practice their religions freely. The Constitution states 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. No legislative, executive, or other act can contravene or interfere with the Orthodox Church or the Vakf. According to regulations, they are required to pay taxes only on strictly commercial activities.

The Turkish Cypriot administration bars religious discrimination. The basic agreement covering treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronites living in the north and Turkish Cypriots living in the south remains the 1975 Vienna III Agreement. Among other things, this agreement provides for facilities for religious worship.

Turkish Cypriot basic law refers specifically to a "secular republic," and provides for religious freedom; no specific religion is recognized in the basic law. Provisions in the 1960 Constitution make the Vakf tax-exempt in its religious activities, which include covering the cost of Muslim religious activities and the salaries of Muslim religious leaders. The Vakf also receives official subsidies. Commercial and real estate operations of the Vakf, however, are subject to the applicable taxes. No other religious organization is tax-exempt or receives subsidies. The Vakf is the largest landowner in the north.

Religious organizations are not required to register with the 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 is rare.

There is instruction in religion, ethics, and comparative religions in two grades of the primary school system in the Turkish Cypriot community. There is no formal Islamic religious instruction in public schools, and there are no state-supported religious schools.

The Turkish Cypriot authorities do not sponsor any interfaith activity.

The following religious holidays are observed widely in the Turkish Cypriot community: Kurban Bairam, Birth of the Prophet Muhammed, and Ramadan Bairam.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Greek Cypriots and Maronites were prohibited from visiting religious sites located in military zones in the Turkish Cypriot community.

Turkish Cypriot authorities gave permission for an Orthodox service to be held in Agias Mamas Church near the town of Guzelyurt/Morphou on September 1 and 2, 2004. On August 27, a bomb exploded in the doorway of the church. No one was hurt in the incident. Although no one claimed responsibility, it was widely believed that Turkish Cypriot nationalists planned the attack to disrupt the Greek Cypriot religious ceremony. In the end, the church was repaired and the ceremony took place as planned. This was the first time in 30 years that Greek Cypriots had been able to hold services in the church; however, Turkish Cypriot authorities did not allow the Greek Cypriot organizers to ring the church bell as part of the ceremony.

In the Turkish Cypriot community, there were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the reporting period.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

In the north there are few non-Muslims, but there is no friction between them and the nominally Muslim population. Greek Cypriots report that unused Orthodox churches and cemeteries in the north continued to be robbed and vandalized, and the Government maintained its claim that Orthodox icons had been smuggled out of the north. Although Turkish Cypriots occasionally have reported that unused mosques in the south also have been vandalized, the Government of Cyprus routinely maintains and repairs them. In February, a Greek Cypriot cemetery near Lapta/Lapithos, which had recently been rehabilitated as part of a U.S.-funded project aimed at improving bicomunal relations, was vandalized.

In May 2005, Turkish Cypriot media alleged that a Greek Cypriot church committee had smuggled a religious icon across the buffer zone (or green line) into the south. There were also reports of Turkish Cypriot cemeteries in the south being destroyed for the construction of roads and other development.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the authorities in the context of its overall policy to promote human rights.

The Ambassador and other Embassy officers meet periodically with Turkish Cypriot religious authorities regarding specific religious freedom concerns.

Released on November 8, 2005

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