

U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Albania

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ALBANIA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice. According to the 1998 Constitution, there is no official religion, and all religions are equal. However, the predominant religious communities (Muslim, Orthodox, Roman Catholic) enjoy de facto recognition by the authorities that gives them the legal right to hold bank accounts, to own property and buildings, and to function as juridical persons based on their historical presence in the country. Religious movements--with the exception of the three de facto recognized religions--can acquire the official status of a juridical person only by registering under the Law on Associations, which recognizes the status of a nonprofit association irrespective of whether the organization has a cultural, recreational, religious, or humanitarian character.

The majority of citizens are secular in orientation after decades of rigidly enforced atheism. Muslims, who make up the largest traditional religious group, adhere to a moderate form of Sunni Islam. The Albanian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches are the other large denominations. Approximately 70 percent of the population are Muslim, 20 percent are Albanian Orthodox, and 10 percent are Roman Catholic. The Albanian Orthodox Church split from the Greek Orthodox Church early in the century, and adherents strongly identify with the Autocephalous National Church as distinct from the Greek Church. The Albanian Orthodox Church's 1929 statute states that all its archbishops must be of Albanian heritage. However, the current archbishop is a Greek citizen, even though, because there are no Albanian clerics qualified for this position.

Foreign clergy, including Muslim clerics, Christian and Baha'i missionaries, Jehovah's Witnesses, and many others freely carry out religious activities. The Religious Council of the State Secretariat, an office that functions under the Prime Minister's authority but has no clear mandate and is unable to make decisions on its own, estimates that there are 20 different Muslim societies and groups with around 95 representatives in the country. There are more than 2,500 missionaries representing Christian or Baha'i organizations.

In 1967 the Communists banned all religious practices and expropriated the property of the established Islamic, Orthodox, and Catholic Churches. The Government has not yet returned all the properties and religious objects under its control that were confiscated under the Communist regime. In cases where religious buildings were returned, the Government often failed to return the land that surrounds the buildings, sometimes due to redevelopment claims by private individuals who began far-

ming it or using it for other purposes following the Communists' expropriation. The Government also is unable to compensate the Churches adequately for the extensive damage that many religious properties suffered. The Orthodox Church has complained that it has had difficulty in recovering some religious icons for restoration and safekeeping.

The State recognizes the de facto existence of the Bektashis, but they do not have the right to their own representative in the State Secretariat of Religions; all their activities are placed under the supervision of the Sunni community.

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

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Relations among the various religious groups generally are amicable, and tolerance is widespread. Society is largely secular. Inter-marriage among religious groups is extremely common.

The Archbishop of the country's Orthodox Church has noted incidents in which the Orthodox and their churches or other buildings have been the targets of vandalism. However, the Archbishop also noted that there was little if any evidence of active persecution against the ethnic Greek minority and concluded that the problem was the country's general climate of insecurity, rather than religious repression. Members of the ethnic Greek minority as well as of the Orthodox Church have been leaving the country for the last year and one-half because of the lack of security and the lack of economic prospects.

There are long standing concerns among Christians about the growing support for Islamic fundamentalism as a result of the influx of Kosovar refugees entering the country.

The Albanian Evangelical Alliance, an association of Protestant Churches, has complained that it has encountered administrative obstacles to building churches and to accessing the media. The growing evangelical community continues to seek official recognition and participation in the religious affairs section of the Council of Ministers.

The Sunnis and Orthodox Christians consider Baha'is to be a threat and exercise increasing pressure on authorities to ostracize them. In a press interview, Hazhi Hafiz Savri Koci, the leader of the Sunni Muslim community, declared that "the virus of pseudo-religions, such as the Baha'i Faith, has infiltrated our weak body. We are at war with them, because they are trying to corrupt our souls through the power of money, spreading religious beliefs and superstition which are totally alien to the Albanian character and tradition."

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government has numerous initiatives to foster the development of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in the country, which also further religious freedom and tolerance. The U.S. Embassy periodically has urged the Government to return the church lands to the denominations that lost them under Communist rule.

Embassy officers--including the Chief of Mission--meet frequently, both in formal office calls and at representational events, with the heads of the major religious communities in the country. The Chief of Mission regularly calls on the heads of the religious communities on the occasion of their most significant religious holidays. These calls usually are shown on state-run television as part of the evening news.

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