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2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Cyprus

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the freedom to worship, teach, and practice one's religion. It grants the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and recognizes the Vakf, an Islamic institution that manages sites of worship and property Muslims have donated, as a charitable endowment.

The government allowed visitors access to only six of the 19 mosques designated as cultural heritage sites, as well as to two other mosques not located on such sites. Of the eight functioning mosques, seven were available for all five daily prayers and seven had the necessary bathroom and ablution facilities. The Department of Antiquities continued to limit regular access to the Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque to only two of the five daily prayers, although it routinely granted expanded access during Ramadan and at the request of the imam. On May 13, the government lifted restrictions imposed due to COVID-19 on the number of persons allowed to attend religious services. Representatives of the Jewish community continued to report authorities performed autopsies on deceased members of the community for deaths that were not suspicious, a practice they said violated Jewish religious beliefs and practice. They stated that despite their continuing efforts to raise the issue with government authorities during the year, it remained unresolved at year's end. Authorities continued to deny permission to perform animal slaughter for food production according to Jewish law. Authorities had yet to respond to a request pending since 2017, and renewed in August, from the Chief Rabbinate of Cyprus to authorize the rabbinate to sign marriage, death, and divorce certificates.

In February, the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), one of the bicomunal (Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot) technical committees established as part of the UN-facilitated settlement negotiations process, finished the conservation of Zuhuri Mosque in Larnaca. In August, the TCCH completed the restoration of Orounda Mosque in Nicosia District. In September, the Department of Antiquities began the long-awaited restoration of the Limassol Grand Mosque after the government unexpectedly closed the mosque in 2019. According to media reports, the Government of Qatar donated €1.2 million (\$1.28 million) for the restoration of Limassol Grand Mosque.

Some religious minority groups continued to report societal pressure to engage in public Greek Orthodox religious ceremonies, such as weddings and christenings. Greek Orthodox Christians reported they sometimes faced ostracism from their community if they converted to another religion. Leaders of the main religious groups continued to meet under the framework of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process (RTCYPP) and advocated greater religious freedom for faith communities across the island. The RTCYPP, organized under the auspices of the Swedish embassy in Nicosia, is a peacebuilding initiative to encourage and facilitate religious leaders' dialogue and promote efforts for religious freedom, human rights, and bicomunal reconciliation.

U.S. embassy representatives, including the Ambassador, continued to meet with government officials to discuss issues such as access to religious sites on both sides of the "Green Line." During the year, the Ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom restrictions, access to religious sites, and interfaith cooperation. In a meeting with the Chief Rabbi of Cyprus at the Jewish Community Center in Larnaca, the Ambassador discussed government policies that the Jewish community believes infringe or restrict Jewish religious practices. In a meeting with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment, and Rural Development, an embassy representative asked the government to reconsider the blanket prohibition of kosher animal slaughter. Embassy staff met with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders to discuss access to religious sites island-wide and discrimination against minority religious groups. Embassy officials also visited places of religious significance on both sides of the "Green Line" and encouraged continued dialogue and cooperation among religious leaders. Embassy staff engaged on numerous occasions with religious leaders in the country, focusing on religious freedom and encouraging interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the island at 1.3 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2021 census, the most recent, the population of the government-controlled area is 918,100. Based on

statistics from the 2011 census of the government-controlled area, the most recent available, 89.1 percent of the total is Orthodox Christian and 2.9 percent is Roman Catholic, known locally as Latin. Other religious groups include Protestants (2 percent), Muslims (1.8 percent), Buddhists (1 percent), Maronite Catholics (0.5 percent), and Armenian Orthodox (0.3 percent), with small populations of Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baha'is. The country's chief rabbi estimates the number of Jews at 6,000, most of whom are foreign-born residents. A Jehovah's Witnesses representative estimates the group has 2,600 members. Recent immigrants are predominantly Roman Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the right of individuals to profess their faith and to worship, teach, and practice or observe their religion, individually or collectively, in private or in public, subject to limitations due to considerations of national security or public health, safety, order, and morals or the protection of civil liberties. The constitution specifies all religions whose doctrines or rites are not secret are free and equal before the law. It protects the right to change one's religion and prohibits the use of physical or moral compulsion to make a person change, or prevent a person from changing, their religion.

The constitution grants the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus (Church of Cyprus) the exclusive right to regulate and administer the church's internal affairs and property in accordance with its canons and charter. By law, the Church of Cyprus pays taxes only on commercial activities.

The constitution sets guidelines for the Islamic Vakf, which is tax exempt and has the right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its laws and principles. According to the constitution, no legislative, executive, or other act may contravene or interfere with the Church of Cyprus or the Vakf. The Vakf, which acts as caretaker of religious properties in the Turkish Cypriot community, operates only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. The government administers and provides financial support for the physical maintenance of mosques in government-controlled areas.

In addition to the Church of Cyprus and Islam, the constitution recognizes three other religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and Latins (Latin Rite Roman Catholics). These groups' institutions are tax exempt and eligible for government subsidies for cultural and educational matters, including to cover costs to operate their own schools, for school

fees of group members attending private schools, and for activities to preserve their cultural identity.

Religious groups not recognized in the constitution must register with the government as nonprofit organizations to engage in financial transactions and maintain bank accounts. To register, a religious group must submit, through an attorney, an application to the Registrar of Companies under the Ministry of Energy, Commerce, and Industry stating its purpose and providing the names of its directors. Religious groups registered as nonprofit organizations are treated the same as other nonprofit organizations. They are tax exempt, must provide annual reports to the government, and are not eligible for government subsidies.

The clergy of the five religious communities (recognized by the constitution) have the authority to perform marriage ceremonies and may sign marriage certificates. Members of the clergy of other faiths must apply to the Ministry of Interior (MOI) for authorization to perform marriages. The list of authorized marriage officers is published in the Official Gazette. Divorce requires a court decision. A state physician or pathologist, not a member of the clergy, signs death certificates.

According to the law, the Armenian, Maronite, and Latin communities each have an elected representative to parliament who has nonvoting observer status. Members of these communities also may run for any of the 56 seats that have voting rights in the body.

The government has formal processes by which religious groups may apply to use restored religious heritage sites for religious purposes.

According to public school regulations, students are not permitted to cover their heads in school. The regulation explicitly states, however, that this prohibition should be implemented without discriminating against a student's religion, race, color, gender, or any political or other convictions of the student or the parents. This language allows schools to be flexible and permit students to wear head coverings.

The law criminalizes incitement to hatred and violence based on race, color, religion, genealogical origin, national or ethnic origin, or sexual orientation. Such acts are punishable by up to five years' imprisonment, a fine of up to €10,000 (\$10,700), or both.

The law requires animal stunning before slaughter. No religious exemptions are allowed.

The government requires Greek Orthodox religious instruction and attendance at religious services before major Greek Orthodox religious holidays in public primary and secondary schools. The Ministry of Education (MOE) may excuse primary school students of other religious groups from attending religious services and instruction at the request of

their parents or guardians, but Greek Orthodox children in primary school may not opt out. The MOE may excuse secondary school students from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience and may excuse them from attending religious services on any grounds at the request of their parents or guardians, or at their own request if over the age of 16.

The Office of the Commissioner for Administration and Protection of Human Rights (informally called the “ombudsman”) is an independent state institution responsible for protecting citizens’ rights and human rights in general. The ombudsman may investigate complaints made against any public service agency or official for actions that violate human rights, including freedom of religion, or contravene the laws or rules of proper administration. The ombudsman makes recommendations to correct wrongdoings but is unable to enforce them.

Conscientious objectors on religious grounds are exempt from active military duty and from reservist service in the National Guard but must complete alternative service. The two options available for conscientious objectors are unarmed military service, which is a maximum of four months longer than the normal 14-month service, or social service, which is a maximum of eight months longer than normal service but requires fewer hours of work per day. The penalty for refusing military or alternative service is up to three years’ imprisonment, a fine of up to €6,000 (\$6,400), or both. Those who refuse both military and alternative service, even if objecting on religious grounds, are considered culpable of an offense involving dishonesty or moral turpitude, are disqualified from holding elected public office, and are ineligible for permits to provide private security services.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

Religious leaders in the government-controlled area said removing obstacles to access to churches, mosques, and monasteries on both sides of the island was their top priority. Imam Shakir Alemdar, a representative of the Muslim community, stated the Department of Antiquities informed him that restoration of the Limassol Great Mosque started in September. The Department of Antiquities closed the mosque in August 2019 without previously informing the Muslim community of the nature of, or timeline for, the restoration. The department conserved and opened Arnavout Mosque in Limassol in 2021 to accommodate the needs of the Muslim community pending completion of the restoration of the Limassol Great Mosque. The MOI reported that it expected the restoration to be completed by 2024. Media reported the government of Qatar donated €1.2 million (\$1.28 million) for the restoration of the mosque.

Muslim community leaders stated the government continued to allow the community access for religious services at only six of the 19 mosques

designated as cultural heritage sites as well as at two other mosques not located on such sites. Of the eight functioning mosques, seven were available for all five daily prayers and seven had the necessary facilities for ablutions.

The government failed to respond to the Muslim community's longstanding request for permission to make improvements at some of the functioning mosques. According to Imam Alemdar, the functioning mosque in Paphos was too small for the size of the Muslim congregation, holding approximately 100 worshippers, compared with an estimated Muslim population of approximately 5,000 in the area. The lack of space prevented adherents, especially women, from attending the prayers. Authorities denied Imam Alemdar's request to use the mosque in the village of Kato Arodhes in Paphos District for the Ramadan period.

During the year, Dhali Mosque continued to operate without ablution facilities or bathrooms; it was the only one of the eight functioning mosques lacking such facilities. In 2019, the MOI said installing facilities at Dhali Mosque was difficult due to limited space near the mosque but that it planned to identify a suitable location and develop new plans. In December 2021, the MOI reported that the only available space for the construction of facilities at the mosque was behind the uninhabited house intended for the mosque's imam. MOI inspectors reportedly found the house structurally unsafe and decided not to proceed with construction because use of the facilities would require passage through the house. The MOI was preparing a study for the stabilization of the house at year's end.

Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, considered the most historically important Islamic religious site in the country because of its ties to a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, continued to be the only one of the eight functioning mosques not regularly open for all five daily prayers. The Department of Antiquities classified the mosque as an "ancient monument" and continued to keep it open only for standard museum hours, which permitted access to the mosque for only two of the five daily prayer times during most of the year. The imam reported the mosque remained open until midnight only during Ramadan. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, a limited number of persons attended communal prayers during Ramadan and services were recorded and uploaded on YouTube. According to the Department of Antiquities and the mosque's imam, the imam had to obtain permission from the MOI and Department of Antiquities to keep the mosque open after 5 p.m. in the autumn and winter months and after 7:30 p.m. in the spring and summer months. The imam said the authorities routinely granted permission for extended hours.

Representatives of the Jewish community continued to report that authorities performed autopsies on deceased members of the community for deaths that were not suspicious, a practice they said violated Jewish

religious beliefs and practice. Jewish representatives stated that despite continuing efforts to raise the issue with government authorities during the year, it remained unresolved. The Jewish community reported that they resorted to courts to prevent autopsies that conflicted with their religious beliefs. According to the law, the state pathologist determines which deaths require autopsies.

Jewish representatives reported that Department of Veterinary Services officials denied exemptions from the requirement to stun animals before slaughter following a 2019 department decision to no longer grant exemptions for religious slaughter. The Jewish community reported it was able to import kosher meat from other European Union (EU) countries at a significantly higher cost than if it were locally available. A Muslim community representative reported the community did not face difficulties accessing halal meat.

Jewish representatives said the government continued not to respond to their longstanding request, first made in 2017 and most recently renewed in August, to grant the Chief Rabbinate of Cyprus the right to sign official documents, including marriage, death, and divorce certificates, as an authorized party. The Jewish community reported that, during the year, it submitted up-to-date documentation asked for by the government in order to re-examine the request. A response was pending at year's end.

A Jehovah's Witnesses representative said that some local government authorities did not allow Jehovah's Witnesses to bury their adherents in some municipal cemeteries, which were often managed by local Greek Orthodox churches. During the year, the Municipality of Tseri denied permission for the burial of a Jehovah's Witness at their municipal cemetery. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives submitted a complaint to the ombudsman's office. A response was pending at year's end. The MOI did not respond to a Jehovah's Witnesses request submitted in 2019 for assistance with the municipalities.

According to a Muslim community representative, the lack of available spaces for Islamic burials was resolved after the Muslim community cleaned up overgrown vegetation at the Larnaca Turkish cemetery and used available space at the Paphos Turkish cemetery. In 2020, the Ministry of Interior denied the request of Imam Alemdar to use Vakf property near the Hala Sultan Mosque as a cemetery.

The military continued to require recruits to take part in a common prayer led by Church of Cyprus clergy during swearing-in ceremonies. Recruits of other faiths, atheists, and those who did not wish to take the oath for reasons of conscience could refrain from raising their hand during the ceremony. They instead recited a pledge of allegiance at a separate gathering.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity often overlap, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Representatives of the Jewish community reported an increase in instances of antisemitic verbal harassment in public places, threats on social media and against Jewish students at schools, vandalism of menorahs and Israeli flags, and antisemitic and pro-Nazi graffiti outside schools attended by Jewish students. Individuals who were attacked in public places wore kippahs or tzitzit. On one occasion, someone threw an empty bottle onto the car of the Chief Rabbi. Witnesses reported some of the incidents to the police. Authorities reported no arrests, according to Jewish community representatives.

The Catholic NGO Caritas, which provides services to asylum seeker and refugees of all faiths, reported that discrimination against Muslim children in schools declined compared with previous years. Moreover, they stated schools offered increased diversity awareness and language training during the year.

The NGOs Caritas and Action for Equality, Support, Antiracism (KISA) reported that women wearing hijabs often faced societal pressure to forgo Islamic dress. Though the ROC does not have any laws that restrict wearing Islamic attire in private firms and educational institutions, media outlets often report confusion about the right of a students to wear hijabs in school. In February, a Limassol court adjudicated that a father and stepmother assaulted their 14-year-old Muslim daughter for removing her headscarf during school hours. The father stated his daughter removed her headscarf due to pressure to conform to Western standards at the school. Officials relocated the couple's children to the care of the Social Welfare Service.

Members of minority religious groups continued to report societal pressures to participate in the public religious ceremonies of majority groups. For example, children of various religious minorities said they faced social pressure to attend Greek Orthodox religious ceremonies at school. Armenian Orthodox representatives continued to say community members who married Greek Orthodox individuals received pressure from their spouse's family members to celebrate a Greek Orthodox wedding and follow Greek Orthodox rituals. Similarly, Armenian Orthodox army recruits reportedly continued to feel peer pressure to take the oath administered by a Greek Orthodox priest.

In February, the TCCH finished the conservation of Zuhuri Mosque in Larnaca. In August, the TCCH completed the restoration of Orounda Mosque in Nicosia District.

The leaders of the five main religious groups on the island continued to meet regularly and to engage with political leaders within the framework of the RTCYPP to discuss religious freedom on the island. The RTCYPP organized regular meetings of religious leaders, facilitated interreligious communication and cooperation, and maintained an office in the Buffer Zone in Nicosia.

On February 7, the RTCYPP leadership briefed Foreign Minister Ioannis Kasoulides on the joint peace efforts of the religious leaders of Cyprus and discussed religious freedom-related challenges. On February 13, Maronite, Greek Orthodox and Muslim religious leaders attended a reception hosted by the Maronite Archbishop of Cyprus for the feast of Saint Maroun, the patron saint of the Maronite Church. On February 21, the religious leaders and representatives of the five religious groups recognized in the constitution met with recently appointed Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Cyprus Colin Stewart to brief him on the activities of the RTCYPP and discussed the role of the United Nations in facilitating access to religious sites on both sides of the island. On February 22, the leaders and representatives of the five religious groups met with the visiting Vice President of the European Commission, Margaritis Schinas. On March 15, the religious leaders briefed a group of ambassadors and heads of diplomatic missions on their efforts to advance religious freedom and protect places of worship. In August, the RTCYPP organized a visit of the five religious leaders and representatives to the Pavilion of Friendship operated by the Roman Catholic community of Sant'Egidio outside the island's largest reception center of asylum seekers to provide meals and activities for residents of the center. In November, the RTCYPP coordinated the attendance of the religious leaders participating in the RTCYPP at the funeral of the Archbishop of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus Chrysostomos II.

The RTCYPP continued its project of offering Greek and Turkish language classes for priests, imams, nuns, and laypersons in the Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite, and Roman Catholic communities who worked for faith-based organizations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy representatives met with government officials from the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, and Justice to discuss religious freedom issues, including encouraging greater access to religious sites on both sides of the "Green Line" and reducing discrimination against minority religious communities. The Ambassador made a request to the Minister of Agriculture, Rural Development, and Environment on behalf of Jewish community leaders to permit kosher animal slaughter.

The Ambassador met with numerous religious leaders, including the Archbishop of the Maronite Church of Cyprus, several Orthodox Church of Cyprus metropolitan bishops, the newly elected Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus, and the Chief Rabbi of Cyprus. Topics of these discussions included interfaith cooperation, lifting restrictions on access to religious sites on either side of the island, concerns expressed by members of religious minorities about their inability to exercise their right to religious freedom in their desired locations, and discrimination for religious reasons by state institutions or society. In February, the Ambassador met with the executive director of the RTCYPP to coordinate action in support of religious freedom.

On February 28, the Ambassador visited the recently renovated Zouhouri/Zuhuri Tekke Mosque in Larnaca and discussed the imam's concerns over the government's treatment of the mosque as a monument controlled by the Department of Antiquities rather than a religious site used and controlled by the Muslim community. The imam amplified photographs of the Ambassador's visit to the mosque via social media. The Ambassador also met with the Chief Rabbi of Cyprus at the Jewish Community Center in Larnaca and discussed with him government policies that the Jewish community believes infringe or restrict Jewish religious practices. The Ambassador raised these issues in meetings with senior members of the government.

Embassy staff continued to discuss religious freedom issues, including religious-based discrimination, with Caritas, the Cyprus Refugee Council, and KISA. They used social media to promote religious freedom and to engage representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah's Witness, Jewish, Maronite, Muslim, and Roman Catholic communities on their concerns about access to, and the condition of, religious sites and cemeteries, incidents of religious-based harassment and discrimination, societal attitudes toward minority religious groups, and obstacles to religious freedom.

Embassy staff raised the question of the restrictions on the opening hours of Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque and the continued lack of facilities at Dhali Mosque in their interactions with the Ministry of Interior and the Department of Antiquities. During a visit to the Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, embassy staff also raised the issue of the limited hours of operation of the mosque, as well as the condition of the Larnaca Turkish Cemetery, with the resident imam of the mosque. Embassy officials supported religious leaders' continuing dialogue within the RTCYPP and encouraged continuing reciprocal visits of religious leaders to places of worship on both sides of the "Green Line." Embassy staff interacted regularly with religious leaders in the country, focusing on religious freedom and encouraging interfaith dialogue.

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