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2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Albania

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
July 30, 2012

[Covers calendar year from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011]

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government met regularly with representatives from religious communities to discuss their work and issues that might impact their ability to practice their religion freely. Throughout the year, the U.S. embassy hosted gatherings with religious and government leaders and met with

government leaders to discuss issues that had been raised by citizens, the media, or religious leaders. U.S. government officials visited churches, mosques, and religious sites throughout the year to observe religious practices and celebrations.

Section I. Religious Demography

No reliable data was available on religious participation or membership; the last official census including such data was conducted in 1939. The 2011 census concluded in November included an optional question for participants to acknowledge religious affiliation, but full survey results are not expected until mid-2012. The four traditional religious groups are Muslim (Sunni), Bektashi (a form of Shia Sufism), Orthodox Christian (the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania), and Roman Catholic. In addition, there are numerous Protestant denominations and other religious groups, including the Baha'i Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The State Committee on Cults reported more than 230 religious groups, organizations, foundations, and educational institutions operating in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

By law the country is secular. According to the constitution, there is no official religion and all religions are equal; however, the Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Catholic communities enjoy a greater degree of recognition (e.g., national holidays) and social status based on their historic presence in the country.

The 2010 anti-discrimination law created the Office of the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, which receives and processes discrimination complaints, including those concerning religious practice. However, the institution lacks adequate funding and staffing.

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 interreligious cooperation and understanding. The committee states its records on religious organizations facilitate the granting of residence permits by police to foreign employees of various religious organizations. No organization reported any difficulty obtaining residency permits.

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 solicit its assistance. 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. Registration grants religious groups the right to hold bank accounts and own property as well as some level of tax-exempt status. The four traditional religious communities signed agreements with the government in 2008 granting them wider tax exemptions and other privileges.

Article 10 of the constitution calls for separate bilateral agreements to regulate relations between the government and religious communities. The Roman Catholic Church has had such an agreement with the government since 2002. In 2008, the government signed agreements with the Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities. The government signed a bilateral agreement with the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania (VUSH), a Protestant umbrella organization, in 2010. Among the advantages of the agreement are an official recognition of the community, prioritized property restitution, and tax exemptions. However, administrative and legal challenges related to ownership claims in general made property restitution difficult for individuals and organizations, including religious groups.

According to the Ministry of Education, public schools are secular and the law prohibits ideological and religious indoctrination. Religion is not taught in public schools. According to official figures, religious communities, organizations, and foundations had 135 affiliated associations and foundations managing 102 educational institutions. By law, the Ministry of Education must license these schools, and curricula must comply with national education standards. Catholic and Muslim groups operate

numerous state-licensed schools and reported no problems obtaining licenses for new schools. The Orthodox Church operates religious schools, a university, and educational centers for the training of clerics. The Bektashis also operate religious clerical training centers.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter (Catholic and Orthodox), Christmas, Major Bajram, Minor Bajram, and Nevruz.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. Religious groups continued to petition the government to restore properties confiscated during the communist era. Some religious groups built new buildings during the year. There were no reports of discrimination in educational facilities.

The government continued to address claims from each of the four traditional religious groups regarding the return or restitution of property seized during the former communist era; however, many of the property claims remained unresolved. Following conclusion of the 2008 bilateral agreements between the government and predominant religious groups, the State Agency for the Restitution and Compensation of Property was instructed to give priority to properties owned by religious communities, although progress was slow.

Property ownership disputes and problems tracking or registering land ownership made it difficult for religious groups to acquire new land to build churches. Some groups rented existing buildings, but reported that their ability to hold appropriate religious services was impeded by their inability to acquire land and construct a church building.

The Albanian Islamic Community continued to request building permits for a new mosque on land that was returned to the community through the post-communist restitution process. In November the Tirana mayor stated publicly that he would establish a municipal commission to expedite the development of a new mosque near Tirana's central square.

There is no law prohibiting the wearing of religious clothing or symbols. School principals have the right to set standards for "appropriate clothing," which at times included restrictions on public displays of religious symbols.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The ambassador and other embassy officials frequently engaged religious leaders in meetings, discussions, and events such as iftars (evening meals during Ramadan) and roundtables. Embassy officials were active in promoting religious tolerance, engaging young persons, women, and other community members in joint activities such as seminars and community gatherings. During the year, the embassy continued its efforts throughout the country in numerous activities to promote religious freedom and tolerance including visits to madrassas, public high schools, and other educational institutions in specific, community-based initiatives.

Embassy officials continued to urge the government to address religious property claims and to return to religious groups the buildings, land, and other property confiscated from them during the communist era.