



2013 Report on International Religious Freedom - Cyprus

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Since 1974 the southern part of Cyprus has been under the control of the government of the Republic of Cyprus, while the northern part, administered by Turkish Cypriots, proclaimed itself the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" ("TRNC") in 1983. The United States does not recognize the "TRNC," nor does any country other than Turkey. A substantial number of Turkish troops remained on the island. A buffer zone, or "green line," patrolled by the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), separates the two parts.

Executive Summary

The constitution of the Republic of Cyprus (ROC) and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. Turkish Cypriots had relatively easy access to religious sites in the government-controlled area, although some cemeteries and mosques within Greek Cypriot military camps were reportedly inaccessible and neglected. Some prisoners in the Central Prison reported that prison regulations restricted their religious rights.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In January vandals partially tore down the walls of the mosque in Deneia village which was under restoration. The government, the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus, and political parties publicly condemned the attack and the bicomunal Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage restored the mosque.

U.S. officials met with government leaders, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues, including access to religious sites, and encouraged interfaith dialogues and bicomunal reciprocal religious visits across the island.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the island to be 1.2 million (July 2013 estimate). According to an October 2011 census by the Government of the Republic of Cyprus, which contains no data on religious affiliation, the population of the government-controlled area is more than 840,000. An earlier census in 2001 included data on religious affiliation that showed 95 percent of the permanent population in the government-controlled area belongs to the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus. Other religious groups include Roman

Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahais, and Buddhists. The religious affiliation of recent immigrants and migrant workers, predominantly Roman Catholics and Buddhists, is generally different from that of native-born citizens. Most of the approximately 2,300 Jews are foreign-born residents.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

The constitution specifies that the Church of Cyprus has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its holy canons and charter. By law, the Church of Cyprus is exempt from taxes on religious activity and pays taxes only on strictly commercial activities.

The constitution sets guidelines for the Vakif, a Sunni Muslim institution that regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots. The Vakif is tax-exempt and has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its laws and principles. No legislative, executive, or other act may contravene or interfere with the Church of Cyprus or the Vakif. The Vakif operates only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and does not administer mosques located in the government-controlled area; the ROC government serves as caretaker for the latter. Mosques in government-controlled areas receive financial support from the government.

The constitution recognizes three other religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and "Latins" (Cypriot Roman Catholics of European or Levantine descent). All are exempt from taxes and eligible for government subsidies for their religious institutions.

Religious groups not among the five recognized in the constitution are not required to register with the government. To engage in financial transactions and maintain bank accounts, however, they must register as nonprofit organizations. In order to register, a religious group must submit through an attorney an application stating its purpose and providing the names of its directors. Religious groups registered as nonprofit organizations are tax-exempt and must provide annual reports; they are not eligible for government subsidies.

Foreign missionaries must obtain and periodically renew residence permits to live in the country. It is illegal for a missionary to use "physical or moral compulsion" to bring about religious conversions. Police may investigate missionary activity based on a citizen's complaint.

The government requires Greek Orthodox religious instruction 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 guardians. Secondary school students may be excused by the ministry from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience, and they may be excused from attending religious services on any grounds at the request of their guardians, or at their own request if over the age of 16.

Conscientious objectors on religious grounds are exempt from active military duty and from reservist service in the National Guard, but must complete alternative service. There are two options available for conscientious objectors: unarmed military service, which is a maximum of five months longer than the normal 24-month service; or social service, which is a maximum of nine months longer than normal service, but requires fewer hours per day.

Government Practices

Muslim community leaders complained that the government had not granted them full access to and administration of mosques that are located on cultural heritage sites.

Turkish Cypriots had relatively easy access to religious sites in the government-controlled area. Turkish Cypriots stated that the Ministry of Communications and Works' Department of Antiquities kept Hala Sultan Tekke (Mosque) open only during conventional museum hours, thus limiting access to the mosque to only two of the five daily prayer times. Throughout the year thousands of Turkish Cypriots visited the Hala Sultan Tekke to conduct prayers and services. Friday afternoon prayers have been ongoing since 2008 and Ramadan services on the Night of Kadir (27th night of Ramadan) have been performed since 2009.

Muslim leaders complained that the restoration of mosques was conducted without consultation with religious authorities and thus violated the sanctity of the space or appropriate use. An example was the restoration of a mosque in Nisou where the garden was landscaped and bones were claimed to have been found and reburied without the presence of an imam. Muslims reported the restoration did not include a washroom; therefore ablutions cannot be performed prior to prayers.

The Ministry of Commerce generally granted religious groups registration as nonprofit organizations.

The international nonprofit organization Conscience and Peace Tax International and the Jehovah's Witnesses argued that the longer duration of alternative service for conscientious objectors compared to military service was punitive. The ombudsman's office did not receive any complaints from conscientious objectors about the procedures the government used to confirm their conscientious objector status and eligibility for alternative military service.

A number of religious groups complained that the government's reluctance to issue visas and residency permits to individuals from countries outside the EU has affected them. The Buddhist community reported difficulties in obtaining visas for clergy. The Jewish community complained about difficulties that student volunteers faced in obtaining government permission for extending their residency, and the Catholic Church said it had difficulties regarding the status of clergy from foreign countries.

Minority religious groups reported that military recruits rarely requested to be excused from taking part in a common prayer led by Church of Cyprus clergy during swearing-in ceremonies because they feared such a request would attract negative attention.

Some prisoners in the Central Prison continued to complain that prison management restricted their religious rights. The ombudsman reported on November 25, that she reiterated to prison authorities her previous recommendations regarding prisoners' religious rights. She did not report any specific complaints in 2013. In April 2012, the ombudsman reported that some members of the Church of Cyprus from Pontus had filed a complaint that the prison management had denied them access to the church on November 21, 2011, an important religious holiday. The ombudsman also reported that prison management did not allow representatives of the Christian Center, an evangelical group located in Nicosia, to visit prisoners who had expressed the wish to meet with them. Prison management informed the ombudsman that prison regulations did not allow prisoners to be visited by representatives of a religious group other than the one they had declared upon admission into the prison. The ombudsman concluded that in both cases the prison management had restricted the religious freedom of the prisoners. The ombudsman recommended an amendment of the prison regulations to allow prisoners to meet with representatives of any religious group as desired.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, which had previously reported problems obtaining exemptions for children from religious instruction, stated that the MOE generally granted exemptions and that their children did not experience difficulties in being excused from attending school performances containing religious content. However, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported that some schools did not make arrangements for the students to engage in supervised school work during the time of religious instruction class, as required by regulations. In one case, a school asked a student who had been granted an exemption to stay in class during religious instruction and punished her with an unexcused absence when she refused to do so. The Jehovah's Witnesses submitted an official complaint to the MOE and the government's ombudsman. The ombudsman issued a report in December of 2012, but continued this year to evaluate the MOE's responses to requests for exemptions.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

As ethnicity and religion were often inextricably linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents of discrimination specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance. Those who were not members of the prevailing religious group often faced negative social reactions if they chose to refrain from participating in public ceremonies that were religious in nature. Likewise, Greek Cypriots who converted from Greek Orthodoxy to other faiths sometimes faced social ostracism. However, relations between the Church of Cyprus and other religious communities in the government-controlled area were generally cordial.

On January 19, vandals tore down part of the walls of a mosque in Deneia village. The mosque was one of the monuments being restored by the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage, a bicomunal group composed of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots appointed by the leaders of their communities. The government, the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus and all the political parties condemned the attack and urged the police to arrest the perpetrators. On January 25, three young men confessed to causing the damage, were charged in writing and released pending a court hearing. On April 25, the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH) announced that the mosque had been fully restored.

Representatives of the Jewish community reported that members were verbally harassed on various occasions throughout the year with reported incidents of property damage.

The TCCH identified cultural heritage sites throughout the island in need of emergency preservation measures. These sites included four mosques in the government-controlled area. The committee signed an agreement taking on the responsibility to facilitate the restoration of Apostolos Andreas Monastery in the Karpas peninsula in the north. On September 17, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) signed separate agreements with the Church of Cyprus and with Evkaf (a Vakif foundation) to implement the restoration project.

In September the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus met with the grand mufti who represents the Muslim community in the north. In October political leaders in both Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities took steps to allow the reciprocal visits of Muslim and Greek Orthodox religious leaders to places of worship across the "Green Line" dividing Cyprus. The grand mufti, accompanied by the archbishop, visited Hala Sultan Tekke in the south for the first time. Religious figures have continued a dialogue and visits on both sides of the buffer zone.

Throughout the year thousands of Turkish Cypriots visited the Hala Sultan Tekke to conduct prayers and services.

The Church of Cyprus donated a church to the Orthodox Romanian community in Cyprus and appointed a priest to serve the community. The Bishop of Tamassos and a representative from the Romanian Patriarchate inaugurated the church on October 6.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officials met frequently with government leaders, NGOs, international organizations, and leaders from a variety of religious groups to discuss religious freedom issues, including access to religious sites on either side of the "green line." Embassy staff observed religious ceremonies of minority religious groups at places of worship where special permissions may be required, such as at Hala Sultan Tekke, St. Mamas, Chrysostiros Church, and at Maronite services. Embassy staff regularly visited sites of religious significance and met with representatives of minority religious groups to listen to their concerns, specifically of the Maronite Catholic and Armenian Orthodox communities. Embassy staff engaged UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief during his visit to Cyprus in September and when he participated in an inter-religious roundtable. Embassy officials encouraged the reciprocal visits between Greek Orthodox and Muslim leaders to places of worship on either side of the "green line" dividing Cyprus.

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