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2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Cyprus

Since 1974, the southern part of Cyprus has been under the authority 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 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 land that Muslims have donated as an endowment for charitable purposes as well as sites of worship. The government granted Turkish Cypriots access to religious sites in the area it controls, including for visits by approximately 1,000 Turkish Cypriots and foreign nationals to Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque on three occasions. Six of eight mosques in the government-controlled area were open for all five daily prayers and had the necessary facilities for ablutions; two other mosques were also open but lacked some facilities. The government did not grant permission to religious groups to make upgrades at mosques. The government ombudsman’s office reported the legal requirement to note persons’ religion on the Civil Marriage Certificate violated the right to privacy and exposed them to possible discrimination. A state nursery school took students to a church to worship “holy remains” without the consent of their parents. The ombudsman concluded the visit was incompatible with the principles of religious freedom and the state’s neutrality towards all religions. The government required those who objected to military service on religious grounds to perform alternate service for longer periods.

The Jewish community reported incidents of assault, verbal harassment, and vandalism. Some religious minority groups reported pressure to engage in religious ceremonies of majority groups. Members of the Greek Orthodox majority reported they sometimes faced social ostracism from the Greek Orthodox community if they converted to another religion, including Islam. Leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet. The religious leaders made a joint call through the press for further easing of restrictions on freedom of religion, including on access to

neglected places of worship and cemeteries. A mosque in a rural area was damaged extensively after an arson attack.

U.S. embassy staff met with the government, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues, including access to religious sites island-wide. The U.S. Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs discussed the state of religious freedom with religious leaders, such as the mufti of Cyprus and the Greek Orthodox archbishop. Embassy officials encouraged religious leaders to continue their dialogue and hold reciprocal visits to places of religious significance on either side of the “green line.”

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the island at 1.2 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the population of the government-controlled area is more than 858,000. Of that total, 89.1 percent is Greek Orthodox Christian and 1.8 percent Muslim. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics (2.9 percent), Protestants (2 percent), Buddhists (1 percent), Maronite Catholics (0.5 percent), Armenian Orthodox (0.3 percent), Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Bahais. Recent immigrants and migrant workers are predominantly Roman Catholic, Muslim, and Buddhist. The country’s chief rabbi estimates the number of Jews at approximately 3,000, most of whom are foreign-born.

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, his or her religion. The ombudsman is an independent state institution that has the power to investigate complaints made against any public service or official for actions that violate human rights, including freedom of religion, or are exercised in contravention of the laws or the rules of proper administration, and to protect citizens’ rights and human rights in general. The ombudsman makes recommendations to correct wrongdoings but does not issue remedial steps.

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

The constitution sets guidelines for the Vakf. The Vakf is tax exempt and has the exclusive 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 operates only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and does not administer mosques located in the government-controlled area. The Vakf acts as caretaker of religious properties in the Turkish Cypriot community. The government serves as caretaker and provides financial support to mosques in government-controlled areas.

Besides The Church of Cyprus and Islam, the constitution recognizes three other religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and “Latins” (Cypriot Roman Catholics). Their institutions are exempt from taxes and eligible for government subsidies for cultural and educational matters, depending on the needs of each group, for example, to cover costs to operate their own schools or for school fees for members of the groups attending private schools or for activities to preserve their cultural identity.

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

The government requires Greek Orthodox religious instruction and attendance at religious services before major holidays in public primary and secondary schools. The Ministry of Education may excuse primary school students of other religious groups from attending religious services and instruction at the request of their guardians, but Greek Orthodox children in primary school may not opt out. All secondary school students may be excused by the Ministry of Education 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 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 alternate service is up to three years’ imprisonment or a fine of up to 6,000 euros (\$6,322), or both. Those who refuse both military and alternate service, even if objecting on religious grounds, are considered to have committed an offense involving dishonesty or moral turpitude and are disqualified from holding elected public office and are not eligible for permits to provide private security services.

Government Practices

The government granted Turkish Cypriots access to religious sites in the area it controlled; however, Muslim community leaders stated the government had not granted them full access to 17 mosques located on cultural heritage sites and denied them any administrative authority over the

sites. Eight of these 17 mosques in the government-controlled area were open. Six of those were available for all five daily prayers and had the necessary facilities for ablutions. A Muslim leader reported there were no ablution facilities and no bathrooms at Bayraktar or Dhali mosques in the government-controlled area. The Ministry of Interior, which has oversight of Turkish Cypriot properties in the government-controlled area, reported that, with the exception of Bayraktar and Dhali Mosques, all other functioning mosques had ablution and bathroom facilities, including Paphos Mosque. The Ministry of Communications and Works' Department of Antiquities reported it provided bathroom facilities at a distance of approximately 100 meters (330 feet) away from Bayraktar Mosque, because the mosque was part of the medieval Venetian wall of the city, making it impossible to install sewage pipes. By year's end, the government had again not responded to a Muslim leader's request for permission to make improvements at the functioning mosques, and there was no change from previous years in either the number of open mosques or the number of ablution and bathroom facilities available at those mosques.

As in previous years, the Department of Antiquities kept the Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, the most important Islamic religious site in the country, open during standard museum hours, limiting access to the mosque to two of the five daily prayer times. The mosque's imam had to ask permission of the Ministry of the Interior and Department of Antiquities to keep the mosque open after 5:00 p.m. in the autumn/winter months and after 7:30 p.m. in the spring/summer months. In order to cross the "green line" without identification checks to visit religious sites, Turkish Cypriots were required to submit their requests to UNFICYP, which then facilitated the approval process with the government.

The government again waived visa requirements for the movement of non-Turkish Cypriot pilgrims south across the "green line" to visit Hala Sultan Tekke to conduct prayers and services on special occasions. On July 1, more than 1,000 pilgrims crossed into the government-controlled areas for a pilgrimage to Hala Sultan Tekke on Eid al-Fitr. On September 15, the police escorted approximately 1,000 Turkish Cypriots, Turks, and other foreign nationals to Hala Sultan Tekke for prayers on Eid al-Adha.

Rejecting a 2015 statement made by the pastor of the Evangelical Christian Center that evangelical prisoners in the central prison did not receive the same treatment as Christian Orthodox and Muslim prisoners, a Cyprus Police sergeant stated all religious groups had the same rights in prison and were free to hold services more frequently if requested. A response from the pastor was unavailable.

In January the ombudsman's office, in its capacity as the Anti-Discrimination Authority, reported that the law's requirement to designate a person's religion on the civil marriage certificate violated individuals' right to privacy and exposed them to possible discrimination in dealings with government and other authorities. The ombudsman recommended that the relevant provision of the law be amended to eliminate any reference to religion. At year's end, the civil marriage certificates continued to designate religion.

In August the ombudsman issued a report on a complaint submitted by the Cyprus Humanists Association against the Ministry of Education that a state nursery school took students to a church to worship "holy remains" without the consent of the parents. The ombudsman concluded the visit was incompatible with the principles of religious freedom and state's neutrality towards all religions. The report said schools should abstain from such activities and called on the Ministry of Education to take appropriate action to prevent recurrence. Reacting to the ombudsman's report, the

archbishop of the Church of Cyprus stated on September 22 that it was not the ombudsman's job to tell people how to practice their faith and she should not involve herself in matters of faith.

Commenting on the relevant Ministry of Education circular on rules exempting students from religious instruction in schools, the Commissioner for the Protection of the Rights of the Child, an independent state official with oversight on children's rights, wrote in August that students and/or their guardians should not be required to state the reasons they requested exemption from religious instruction.

On November 9, Minister of Defense Christoforos Fokaides unveiled a memorial to Jewish Holocaust survivors who were interned in camps on the island after World War II.

As in previous years, military recruits were required 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 were not required to raise their hand during the swearing-in ceremony. They instead gave a pledge of allegiance at a separate gathering.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Representatives of the Jewish community continued to report incidents of assault and verbal harassment directed against people with yarmulkes and *payot* (hair side curls). By year's end, the police had not arrested any suspects for any of the incidents.

Minority religious groups continued to report societal pressures to participate in public religious ceremonies. For example, they said children of various religious minorities faced pressure to attend religious ceremonies at school, even though they had the option to request they be exempted from participation. The Maronite community also reported Maronite national guard conscripts faced such pressure. Greek Orthodox adherents who converted to other faiths, including Islam, reportedly continued hiding their conversion from family and friends out of fear of social ostracism.

On February 21, Dhenia mosque, an official heritage site located in the buffer zone in Dhenia village west of Nicosia, suffered extensive damage after arson. The government condemned the attack and contributed to the restoration of the mosque, completed on March 2. A police investigation did not lead to any arrests.

In April the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), one of the bicommunal working groups set up as part of the UN-facilitated settlement talks, announced that, as part of its Small Project Activities initiative, it would accelerate the restoration of Arnavut and Koprulu mosques in Limassol and of Mathiatis mosque in Nicosia district.

The leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet regularly and visit places of worship on both sides of the buffer zone. On February 10, the leaders of the five principal religious groups, Archbishop Chrysostomos II of the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus; Dr. Talip Atalay, Mufti of Cyprus; Archbishop Soueif of the Maronite Catholic Church; a representative of

the Armenian Orthodox Church (the archbishop was out of the country); and Father Jerzy Kraj, representing the Latin Catholic Church, made a joint call through the press for further easing of restrictions on freedom of religion, including improved access to destroyed or neglected places of worship and cemeteries. In March the religious leaders sent a joint letter to the leaders of the two communities outlining their expectations from a settlement with regard to the administration of properties belonging to religious institutions. In the same month, Mufti of Cyprus Atalay and Bishop Porfyrios of Neapolis, representing Archbishop Chrysostomos II, made a joint presentation at the Human Rights Council in Geneva, in which they highlighted their cooperative efforts for the realization of religious freedom across the island.

Members of all minority religious groups continued to report relations between the Church of Cyprus and other religious communities in the government-controlled area were cordial.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives continued to meet frequently with the government, including with officials from the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, Justice, and Defense, as well as the Department of Antiquities and the Office of the Ombudsman, to discuss religious freedom issues, such as access to religious sites on either side of the “green line” dividing the country.

The U.S. Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs visited Cyprus in March and met jointly and separately with the leaders and representatives of the five main religious groups such as the mufti and the Greek Orthodox archbishop. He discussed the ongoing dialogue among the religious leaders, access to religious sites, and the religious leaders’ contribution to the efforts for a settlement. He visited several religious sites on both sides of the island and met with members of the Greek Cypriot and the Maronite communities residing in the area under Turkish Cypriot administration.

Embassy staff continued to discuss religious freedom issues with the NGOs Movement for Equality, Support, Anti-Racism (KISA) and Future Worlds Center, and met with representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Bahai, Buddhist, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witness, Jewish, Latin, Maronite, and Muslim communities to listen to their concerns about access to and the condition of religious sites, and inquire about incidents of discrimination or violence based on religion, societal attitudes toward minority religions, and obstacles to full enjoyment of religious freedom. Embassy officials were supportive of the ongoing religious leaders’ dialogue and encouraged the continuing reciprocal visits of Christian and Muslim leaders to places of worship on both sides of the “green line.”