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2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Cyprus

Read a Section: Republic of Cyprus

AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Since 1974, the southern part of Cyprus has been under the control of the government of the Republic of Cyprus. 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 remain on the island. A “green line,” or buffer zone (which is over 110 miles long and several miles wide in places) patrolled by the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), separates the two parts. This report is divided into two parts: the Republic of Cyprus and the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. For areas in the north that have different Greek and Turkish names, both are listed (e.g., Kormakitis/Korucam).

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. Two of the eight functioning mosques under the guardianship of the Ministry of Interior continued to lack bathroom and ablution facilities. The Department of Antiquities continued to limit regular access to 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. The imam of Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque said Department of Antiquities’ security guards continued to allow some non-Muslim tourists to enter the mosque without observing the proper dress code. The imam said that the Larnaca Turkish cemetery was completely full and the Ministry of Interior denied his request for the construction of a new cemetery in nearby Vakf land. The Jewish community reported authorities continued to conduct autopsies for nonsuspicious deaths, against the community’s wishes. Authorities continued to deny permission to perform animal slaughter for food production according to Jewish law. In early April, the Council of Ministers submitted to the House of Representatives a bill allowing kosher and halal slaughter of animals. The government withdrew the bill on April 24 following strong reactions by animal rights activists. Authorities did not respond to a request pending since 2017 from the Chief Rabbinate of Cyprus to have the right to officiate marriage, death, and divorce certificates.

In May, unknown persons threw firecrackers into the premises of Koprulu Mosque in Limassol and sprayed anti-Muslim, antimigrant graffiti on the walls surrounding the 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 advocate for greater religious freedom for faith communities across the island.

U.S. embassy representatives continued to meet with government officials to discuss various issues, including access to religious sites on either side of the “green line” dividing the country. The Ambassador met with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom restrictions, access to religious sites, and interfaith cooperation. Embassy staff met with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious leaders to discuss topics, including access to religious sites island-wide and discrimination against minority religious groups. Except for a few virtual engagements because of COVID-19 restrictions, most were in-person meetings. Embassy officials also visited places of religious significance on both sides of the “green line” and encouraged continued dialogue and cooperation among religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the island at 1.3 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the most recent, the population of the government-controlled area is 840,000. Of that total, 89.1 percent 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 4,500, most of whom are foreign-born residents. A Jehovah’s Witnesses representative estimates the group has 2,600 members. Recent immigrants and migrant workers 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, his or her religion.

The constitution grants the Autocephalous 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 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, 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 (Roman Catholics). Their 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 in order 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 government has formal processes by which religious groups may apply to use restored religious heritage sites for religious purposes.

According to a public school regulation, students are not permitted to cover their heads in school. The regulation explicitly states, however, that it 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.

The law requires animals to be stunned before slaughter; no religious exemptions are granted.

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 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 guardians or at their own request if over the age of 16.

The Office of the Commissioner for Administration and Protection of Human Rights (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 cannot 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 euros (\$7,400), or both. Those who refuse both military and alternative 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 ineligible for permits to provide private security services.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Although requests for access to religious sites declined due to government-imposed COVID-19 mitigation measures, religious leaders on both sides of the island said this issue remained a top priority. As of year’s end, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) had not responded to a letter from Imam Shakir Alemdar, representative of the Mufti, regarding the Department of Antiquities’ August 2019 closure of the Limassol Great Mosque for restoration. The Department of Antiquities took the action without previously informing the Muslim community of the nature of, or timeline for, the restoration.

Muslim community leaders stated the government continued to allow the community access for religious services to only six of the 19 mosques located on 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 six had the necessary facilities for ablutions. The government again failed to respond to the Muslim community’s longstanding 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. The Bayraktar and Dhali Mosques had no ablution facilities and no bathrooms. Imam Shakir reported that the functioning mosque in Paphos was too small for the size of the Muslim population, holding approximately 100 worshippers, compared with an estimated Muslim population of approximately 5,000 in the area. He said the Department of Antiquities did not approve his request to allow the use of the recently restored Grand Mosque of Paphos. In 2019, the MOI said that 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. MOI officials had not provided an update as of year’s end.

The Department of Antiquities and Imam Shakir agreed on plans for the installation of bathrooms and ablution facilities at the Bayraktar Mosque. Shakir reported the Department of Antiquities informed him that the plans had been submitted in October to the MOI to initiate the project. Construction, however, had not begun by year’s end.

Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque, the most important Islamic religious site in the country, 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, limiting access to the mosque to two of the five daily prayer times during most of the year. The imam reported the mosque remained open 24 hours daily only during Ramadan. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, only a few persons attended. Ramadan services were recorded and uploaded on YouTube. According to the Department of Antiquities and the mosque’s imam, the imam still had to ask 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.

In October, the imam of Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque reported that security guards stationed at the complex by the Department of Antiquities sometimes did not require visitors to wear appropriate clothing when entering the mosque.

In previous years, the government waived visa requirements for the movement of non-Turkish Cypriot pilgrims crossing the “green line” into the south to visit Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque to conduct prayers and services on special occasions. The United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) facilitated these movements. No such requests were submitted during the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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. They stated that despite their continuing efforts to raise the issue with government authorities during the year, it remained unresolved.

Jewish representatives again 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. In early April, the Council of Ministers submitted to the House of Representatives a bill allowing kosher and halal slaughter of animals, i.e., without stunning. The government withdrew the bill on April 24 following strong reactions by animal rights activists. Jewish community leadership reported sending letters on the issue to all members of the House of Representatives, the President of the Agriculture Committee, and the President of the Chamber of Commerce. On December 17, the EU Court of Justice ruled that EU member states may impose a requirement to stun animals prior to slaughter and that such a requirement does not infringe on the rights of religious groups.

Jewish representatives again said the government continued not to respond to their longstanding request to grant the Chief Rabbinate of Cyprus the right to sign official documents as an authorized party, including marriage, death, and divorce certificates.

A Jehovah’s Witnesses representative said that Jehovah’s Witnesses were still not allowed to bury their adherents in some municipal cemeteries – which were often managed by local Greek Orthodox churches – despite asking the MOI for assistance with the municipalities in 2019.

Representative of the Mufti of Cyprus Imam Alemdar said the Larnaca Turkish cemetery was completely full and that new land for Islamic burials was required. In February, he sent a letter to the MOI requesting that a Vakf property near Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque be made available as a cemetery. According to the representative of the Mufti, an MOI official denied the request in February, saying there was space for burials in the existing 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 are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On May 31, unknown individuals threw firecrackers into the premises of Koprulu Mosque in Limassol and sprayed anti-Muslim, antimigrant graffiti on the wall surrounding the mosque. President Nicos Anastasiades, mayor of Limassol Nicos Nicolaides, and all principal political parties condemned the attack. A police investigation did not identify the perpetrators of the attack. Police increased patrols around the three mosques in Limassol, and the municipality of Limassol installed closed-circuit television at Koprulu Mosque. Authorities repaired the damage caused, which they described as slight, and cleaned the graffiti from the walls. On June 1, leaders of the five constitutionally recognized religious groups jointly condemned the attack and the vandalism.

Unlike in previous years, representatives of the Jewish community reported there were no instances of anti-Semitic verbal harassment in public places.

The NGO Caritas reported that discrimination against Muslim children in schools declined compared with previous years and stated that increased diversity awareness and language training during the year generally improved behavior towards non-native Muslim students.

NGOs Caritas and KISA said women wearing hijabs often faced difficulties finding employment. According to Caritas, in October 2019, a Somali woman filed a complaint with the Ombudsman based on a hotel’s refusal to employ her in August 2019 because she was wearing a hijab. Her case remained under review at year’s end.

Members of minority religious groups continued to report societal pressures to participate in 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. An Armenian Orthodox representative continued to say that community members who married Greek Orthodox individuals received pressure from their spouse’s family members to have 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.

Some Greek Orthodox adherents who converted to other faiths reportedly continued to hide their conversion from family and friends due to fear of social ostracism.

In September, the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH), one of the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot technical committees established as part of the UN-facilitated settlement negotiations process, completed a project to stabilize the Saint James and Saint George Churches in the buffer zone in Nicosia. The TCCH said the churches could not be fully restored because they were in an area controlled by the Turkish military. In October, the TCCH launched projects for restoring four mosques in the villages of Kalo Chorio, Maroni, Lefkara, and Ayios Theodoros in Larnaca District.

The leaders of the main religious groups on the island continued to meet regularly, in-person and online, within the framework of the RTCYPP. On February 14, Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian, Maronite, and Roman Catholic leaders met to mark the 10th anniversary of the RTCYPP and issued a joint statement calling on all Cypriots and political leaders to join them in their effort to advance religious freedom. They met again on June 16 at the Home for Cooperation, a nonprofit community center in the buffer zone in Nicosia, and were joined virtually by Foreign Minister Ann Linde of Sweden in another ceremony to mark the 10th anniversary of the RTCYPP, which began as an initiative of the Swedish embassy.

On May 6, leaders of the five constitutionally recognized religious groups issued a joint message on the occasion of Easter and Ramadan to extend their prayers to those suffering the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, to thank those on the front lines, and to call on the faithful to abide by authorities’ instructions to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. On March 20, the five religious leaders issued a joint message uniting their voices and their prayers against the pandemic.

In May, Christian religious leaders under the framework of the RTCYPP issued a joint greeting to the Mufti of Cyprus and all Muslim faithful wishing them a blessed Eid al-Fitr.

A joint project of religious leaders through the RTCYPP offering Greek and Turkish-language classes for members of the Greek Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian Orthodox, Maronite, and Roman Catholic communities continued for priests, imams, nuns, and laypersons who worked for faith-based organizations. Classes continued online when in-person gatherings were not possible due to COVID-19-related restrictions.

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 either side of the “green line” and discrimination against minority religious communities.

The Ambassador discussed restrictions on access to religious sites and interfaith cooperation with numerous religious leaders, including the Archbishop of the Maronite Church of Cyprus and several Orthodox Church of Cyprus metropolitan bishops. She visited the Jewish Community Center in Larnaca and discussed religious freedom and religious-based discrimination with the Chief Rabbi of Cyprus. The Ambassador discussed with the Swedish ambassador ways to promote religious freedom on the island and to support the efforts of the RTCYPP to encourage cooperation among religious leaders.

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 engaged representatives of the Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witness, Jewish, Maronite, Muslim, and Roman Catholic communities to hear 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 visited Hala Sultan Tekke Mosque and discussed the mosque’s limited hours of operation and the condition of the Larnaca Turkish Cemetery with the resident imam. 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.”

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