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Albania

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 11,100 square miles, and its population is approximately 3,069,275. It has a largely homogeneous ethnic population, consisting of Ghegs in the north and Tosks in the south. The ethnic Greek communities, the largest minority group in the country, are located in the southern part of the country. Other small minorities include the Roma, Egyptian community (an ethnic group similar to the Roma which does not speak the Roma language), Vlachs, Chams, and Macedonians.

The majority of citizens are secular in orientation after decades of rigidly enforced atheism under the Communist regime, which ended in 1990. Despite such secularism, most citizens traditionally associate themselves with a religious group. Citizens of Muslim background make up the largest traditional religious group (estimated at 65 to 70 percent of the population) and are divided into two communities: those associated with a moderate form of Sunni Islam and those associated with the Bektashi school (a particularly liberal form of Shi'a Sufism). In 1925 after the revolution of Ataturk, the country became the world center of Bektashism, although it has not been recognized as such by the Government. Bektashis are estimated to represent approximately one quarter of the country's Muslim population.

The Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania (referred to as Orthodox) and the Roman Catholic Church are the other large denominations. An estimated 20 to 25 percent of the population belongs to communities that are traditionally Albanian Orthodox, and approximately 10 percent are Roman Catholics. The Orthodox Church became independent from Constantinople's authority in 1929 but was not recognized as autocephalous, or independent, until 1937. The Church's 1954 statute states that all its archbishops must have Albanian citizenship; however, the current archbishop is a Greek citizen whose application for citizenship has been pending for several years.

Muslims are spread throughout the country but are concentrated mostly in the middle of the country and to a lesser extent in the south. Orthodox remain mainly in the south, and Catholics in the north of the country; however, this division is not strict, particularly in the case of many urban centers, which have mixed populations. The Greek minority, concentrated in the south, belongs to the Orthodox Church. No data is available on active participation in formal religious services, but estimates are that 30 to 40 percent of the population practices a religion. Foreign religious representatives, including Muslim clerics, Christian and Baha'i missionaries, members of Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

(Mormons), and many others freely carry out religious activities.

According to the State Committee on Cults, during the period covered by this report, there were about 17 different Muslim societies and groups active in the country; some of these groups were foreign. There were 31 Christian societies representing more than 45 different organizations and 500 to 600 Christian and Baha'i missionaries. The largest foreign missionary groups were American, British, Italian, Greek, and Arab.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. According to the 1998 Constitution, there is no official religion and all religions are equal; however, the predominant religious communities (Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic) enjoy a greater degree of official recognition (e.g., national holidays) and social status based on their historical presence in the country. All registered religious groups have the right to hold bank accounts and to own property and buildings. Official holidays include religious holydays from all four predominant faiths.

Religious movements may acquire the official status of a juridical person by registering with the Tirana District Court under the Law on Associations, which recognizes the status of a nonprofit association regardless of whether the organization has a cultural, recreational, religious, or humanitarian character. 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 contact it for assistance. No groups reported difficulties registering during the period covered by this report. All religious communities have criticized the Government for its unwillingness to grant them tax-exempt status. However, during 2003, the Government exempted foreign religious missionaries from the residence permit tax.

The State Committee on Cults, created by executive decision and based on the Constitution, is charged with regulating the relations between the Government and all religious communities, large and small. The Chairman of the Committee has the status of a deputy minister and answers directly to the Prime Minister. The Committee recognizes the equality of religious communities and respects their independence. The Committee works to protect freedom of religion and to promote interreligious cooperation and understanding. The Committee claims that its records on religious organizations facilitate the granting of residence permits by police to foreign employees of various religious organizations. In the past, however, some foreign religious organizations have claimed that the Committee's involvement has not facilitated access to residence permits. No organization made such a claim during the period covered by this report.

There is no law or regulation forcing religious organizations to notify the Committee of their activities; however, Article 10 of the Constitution calls for separate bilateral agreements to regulate relations between the Government and religious communities. No agreements exist at this time. The State Committee on Cults is considering the drafting of a law that would address all religious communities holistically; however, no action had been taken on this by the end of the period covered by this report. In 2002, the Committee coordinated the drafting of a model bilateral agreement for use in future negotiations with each religious community. Further progress in this direction has been placed on hold while the Committee considers the above-mentioned Law on Religion.

According to official figures, there are 14 religious schools in the country, with approximately 2,600 total students. The Ministry of Education has the right to approve the curricula of religious schools to ensure their compliance with national education standards, and the State Committee on Cults oversees implementation. There are also 68 vocational training centers administered by religious communities.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Government is secular. The Ministry of Education asserts that public schools in the country are

secular and that the law prohibits ideological and religious indoctrination. Religion is not taught in public schools. While there is no law restricting the demonstration of religious affiliation in public schools, there have been instances when students were not allowed to do so in practice. In December 2003, a male Muslim student was prohibited from having his diploma photograph taken because he had a beard. The student was eventually permitted to graduate through the intervention of the Office of the People's Advocate (a government institution tasked with investigating citizens' charges of human rights violations and protecting their fundamental freedoms). No restriction is imposed on families regarding the way they raise their children with respect to religious practices.

In 1967, the Communist government banned all religious practices and expropriated the property of the established Islamic, Orthodox, Catholic and other churches. The Government has not yet returned all the properties and religious objects under its control that were confiscated during the Communist regime. In cases in which religious buildings were returned, the Government often failed to return the land that surrounds the buildings, sometimes due to redevelopment claims by private individuals who began farming it or using it for other purposes. The Government does not have the resources to compensate churches adequately for the extensive damage many religious properties suffered. Although it has recovered some confiscated property, including one large parcel of land near Tirana's main square where construction on a cathedral is under way, the Orthodox Church has claimed delays in approvals for construction of churches and other buildings associated with the Church by the city government, and a lack of action on a number of other property claims throughout the country, as well as difficulty in recovering some religious icons for restoration and safekeeping.

The Roman Catholic community also has outstanding property claims, but was able to consecrate a new cathedral in central Tirana in 2002 on land provided by the Government as compensation for other land confiscated during the Communist era. The Sunni Muslim and Bektashi Communities have also requested that the Government return a number of religious properties, including, in the case of the former, a large parcel of land located across from the Parliament building in the center of Tirana on which a mosque once stood. The new Urban Regulatory Plan for Tirana sets aside land for a new mosque on this land. The Bektashi Community is also seeking compensation from the Government for victims of religious prosecution during the Communist regime.

In May, Parliament approved a property restitution law that includes provisions addressing religious properties, which may improve the overall situation for all religious communities. According to the new law, religious communities should have the same rights as private individuals in matters of property restitution or compensation. By the end of the period covered by this report, the law (controversial for unrelated reasons) had been rejected by the President, who returned it to Parliament for further revision.

The Albanian Evangelical Alliance, an association of approximately 97 Protestant churches throughout the country, claimed that it encountered administrative obstacles to accessing the media. However, Evangelical Alliance representatives stated that it was not clear whether the limited access was due to the organization's small size or to its religious affiliations. The growing evangelical community has expanded its relationship with the country's various public institutions such as the universities.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Society is largely secular. Intermarriage among members of different religions is extremely common. Religious communities take pride in the tolerance and understanding that prevails among them.

After the General Secretary of the Islamic Community of Albania, Sali Tivari, was shot and killed at the Community's headquarters in January 2003, the General Prosecutor's Office returned the case to the authorities for further investigation. The case remained unsolved by the end of the period covered by this report.

In October 2003, police arrested Kastriot Myftari, author of the book "Albanian National Islamism" on charges of inciting religious hatred. The book contained the author's opinions on Islam and how the religion has impacted Albanian life. According to the prosecutor's office, several statements in the book demeaned Islam. The prosecutor had asked the court for 6 months imprisonment for the author. In June, the court acquitted Myftari of all charges.

In 2002, some Bektashi communities outside of Tirana experienced intimidation, vandalism, and threats of violence. Subsequently, the Albanian authorities discovered those responsible (non-Albanian citizens) and expelled them for immigration violations. There were no new reports of vandalism during the period covered by this report.

Bektashi leaders believe that foreign religious influences seeking to undermine the country's efforts to maintain religious tolerance and freedom were at the root of these incidents. Other religious leaders have expressed similar concerns about the potentially divisive role played by non-citizen religious extremists.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Government has employed numerous initiatives to foster the development of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in the country, and to further religious freedom and tolerance. The U.S. Embassy continues to urge the Government to address outstanding religious property claims and to return church lands to the denominations that lost them under Communist rule. Embassy officers, including the Chief of Mission, meet frequently (both in formal office calls and at representational events) with the heads of the major religious communities in the country.

Traditionally tolerant in religious affairs, the society is nonetheless subject to a range of external influences. Projects that support inter-faith understanding and that strengthen civic education in religious school help ensure that that tradition is preserved as forms of Islam and Christianity, new to the country, seek to take root. The Embassy has been active in urging tolerance and moderation as a continued hallmark of society. The Embassy's Public Affairs Office has provided grants to local organizations to promote interfaith tolerance and understanding and to support the teaching of civic affairs and religious tolerance in secondary schools, including schools operated by faith-based organizations.

One project, the Civic and Faith-based Education Project, initiated throughout the country a series of roundtable discussions among educators, media representatives, and national and local government leaders to explore ways in which civic education is a community endeavor that extends beyond classroom walls. Working with the Medressa in Tirana, the leading Islamic school in the country, the Project developed the "School Gym Project." Students in this program learned about the application of civic principles as they visited municipal offices and utility companies to learn about licensing and other procedures associated with construction permits, water and sewer connections, and other requirements associated with the school's gymnasium expansion. Another highlight of the project was a joint effort carried out by students of the Medressa and one of the leading public high schools in Tirana. Medressa students visited the high school to participate with their public-school counterparts in presentations about religious communities' respective holydays. Muslim youth researched and presented Christian holydays, while Christian youth explained the significance of Islamic celebrations.

The Embassy's Public Affairs Office also supported a series of roundtable discussions on religious tolerance in local communities. The implementing nongovernmental organization brought together local government representatives, religious leaders, and other members of the

community in smaller cities throughout the country for frank discussions of inter-faith relations, areas for concern, and ways to strengthen collaboration to promote general well-being in society. In May the same organization, similarly supported by the Embassy, embarked on a follow-on project entitled "Tolerance Days in Religious Schools" through which secular and religious community leaders, government officials, and others explored how to strengthen mutual understanding among faiths.

In May, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launched a \$1.340 million (approximately 135 million Albanian Lek (ALL)) two-year project through the NGO World Learning (WL) on fostering religious tolerance in the country. The \$1.340 million total consists of \$1.184 million in USG financing and a WL cost-share contribution of \$0.156 million, respectively. The project seeks to support the peaceful coexistence of the different religious groups and to foster greater understanding among persons of different faiths.

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