

**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:****Albania**

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ALBANIA

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.

Both government policy and the generally amicable relationship among the religions in society contribute to the free practice of religion.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion**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 (Muslim, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic) enjoy de facto recognition by the authorities that gives them the legal right to hold bank accounts, to own property and buildings, and to function as juridical persons based on their historical presence in the country.

Religious movements-with the exception of the three de facto recognized religions-can acquire the official status of a juridical person only by registering under the Law on Associations, which recognizes the status of a nonprofit association irrespective 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 a working knowledge, but not official records of foreign religious organizations. The chairman of the committee has the status of a deputy minister.

The State Committee on Cults, which was founded in September 1999 according to a decision of Council Ministers, aims to regulate the relations between the State and religious communities. The committee recognizes the equality of religious communities and respects their independence. The committee works to protect freedom of religion and to promote interreligious development, cooperation, understanding and

tolerance. The Committee claims that registration facilitates the granting of residence permits by police to foreign employees of various religious organizations.

Some foreign religious organizations have complained that obtaining registration has not made gaining residence permits any less cumbersome administratively. There is no law or sublegal provision that forces religious organizations to register with the committee. There is no law on religious communities, although one is mandated by the new Constitution. Most religious communities recognize the need for such a law to clarify their rights and responsibilities and relationship to the Government. The committee has shown a willingness to act as a mechanism for creation and passage of such a law.

Religious Demography

The majority of citizens are secular in orientation after decades of rigidly enforced atheism. Muslims make up the largest traditional religious group and are divided into two communities: those who adhere to a moderate form of Sunni Islam and those who adhere to the Bektashi school (a particularly liberal form of Shi'a Sufism). Albania is the world center of the Bektashi school, which moved from Turkey to Albania in 1925 after the revolution of Ataturk. Bektashis are concentrated mainly in middle and southern Albania and claim that 45 percent of the country's Muslims belong to their school. The Albanian Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches are the other large denominations.

Approximately 70 percent of the population are Muslim, 20 percent are Albanian Orthodox, and 10 percent are Roman Catholic. The Albanian Orthodox Church split from the Greek Orthodox Church early in the century and adherents strongly identify with the Autocephalous National Church as distinct from the Greek Church. The Albanian Orthodox Church's 1929 statute states that all its archbishops must be of Albanian heritage. However, the current archbishop is a Greek citizen, because there are no Albanian clerics qualified for this position.

The Muslims are concentrated mostly in the middle of the country and somewhat in the south; Orthodox believers are concentrated mainly in the south, and Catholics in the north of the country; however, this division is not strict. The Greek minority, concentrated in the south, belongs to the Orthodox Church. There are no data available on active participation in formal religious services, but unofficial sources state that 30 to 40 percent of the population practice religion. Foreign clergy, including Muslim clerics, Christian and Baha'i missionaries, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and many others freely carry out religious activities.

The State Committee on Cults estimates that there are 12 different Muslim societies and groups with some 324 representatives in the country. There are more than 79 Christian societies and groups, with 344 missionaries representing Christian or Baha'i organizations. The main foreign missionary groups are mostly American, British, Italian, Greek, and Arab.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

In 1967 the Communists banned all religious practices and expropriated the property of the established Islamic, Orthodox, and Catholic Churches. The Government has not yet returned all the properties and religious objects under its control that were confiscated under the Communist regime. In cases where 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. The Orthodox Church has complained that it has had difficulty in recovering some religious icons for restoration and safekeeping.

The State recognizes the de facto existence of the Bektashis, but they did not have the right to their own representative in the former State Secretariat of Religions. The Secretariat has been replaced by the State Committee on Cults, which is not composed of representatives of religious groups. There is no indication of the Bektashis' activities being placed under the supervision of the Sunni community.

The Albanian Evangelical Alliance, an association of more than 100 Protestant churches throughout the country, has complained that it has encountered administrative obstacles to building churches, accessing the media, and receiving exemptions from customs duties. The growing evangelical community continues to seek official recognition and participation in the religious affairs section of the Council of Ministers.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

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

Section II. Societal Attitudes

Relations among the various religious groups are generally amicable, and tolerance is widespread. Society is largely secular. Inter-marriage among religious groups is extremely common. There are amicable relations between the three main religions in the country. At the beginning of 2000, the Orthodox and the Catholic churches wrote, for the first time in their history, a joint declaration on the beginning of the new millennium and the celebration of 2000 years of Christianity.

The Archbishop of the country's Orthodox Church has noted incidents

in which the Orthodox and their churches or other buildings have been the targets of vandalism. There were reports that a number of Orthodox churches in the south were burned. The Albanian Helsinki Committee issued a report on August 26, 1999, stating that unknown persons damaged or desecrated more than 10 Orthodox churches and monasteries in 1998 and 1999. In July 1999, a Greek Orthodox church in Ksamil was desecrated with human feces smeared on icons, then set on fire. Also in July 1999, a Greek Orthodox church in Metohi was burned down. However, the Archbishop concluded that the problem in such attacks against the ethnic Greek minority was the country's general climate of insecurity, rather than religious repression. Members of the ethnic Greek minority as well as of the Orthodox Church left the country in large numbers between 1990 and 1991, with another large exodus between 1997 and 1998 because of the lack of security and poor economic prospects. Ethnic Greek citizens, among others, continue to leave the country in search of employment and/or permanent residence elsewhere.

The longstanding concerns among Christians about the growing support for Islamic fundamentalism were heightened as a result of the influx of Kosovar refugees into the country. After the war, nearly all the Kosovar refugees left the country, and there were no indications of a growth of fundamentalism among the few that remained. The concern among the Christians regarding this issue remains the same as before the influx of Kosovars. After the war, the fundamentalist associations, active in Albania during the war, were later displaced into Kosovo.

The Baha'is are no longer considered a threat by the Sunnis and Orthodox Christians. They have established a good reputation and the community is expanding rapidly.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government has numerous initiatives to foster the development of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in the country, which also furthers religious freedom and tolerance. The U.S. Embassy periodically has urged the Government to return the church lands to the denominations that lost them under Communist rule. In 1999 and 2000 the U.S. Embassy urged the Government to restore land that was seized from the Orthodox Church in Gjirokastra and asked the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to assist through the Land Tenure Center Project. The Embassy and USAID also are providing support together with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the U.N. for the drafting of the law on freedom of religion.

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. The U.S. Embassy has been active in urging tolerance and moderation on the part of the Albanian Government's Committee on Cults.

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