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Macedonia

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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

There was no overall change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The continued absence of provocative actions by state and nonstate actors, and ongoing government efforts to consolidate a unitary, multiethnic state, helped foster a climate of general respect for religious freedom. However, the law places some limits on religious practice by restricting the registration of religious groups and locations where religious rites may be performed. During the period covered by this report, these restrictions were applied to a small group aligned with the Serbian Orthodox Church, which denies the ecclesiastical independence of the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

The generally amicable relationship among the various religious communities contributed to religious freedom. However, the dispute between the Serbian and Macedonian Orthodox churches intensified in May 2005, when the Serbian Orthodox Church rejected the legitimacy of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and instead recognized a small splinter group as the "only canonical" church in Macedonia. The Government, with general support from the majority of the Macedonian public, openly sided with the Macedonian Orthodox Church in the long-running dispute.

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 an area of 9,781 square miles and its population is a little more than 2 million. The country has two major religions: Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Nominally, 66 percent of the population is Macedonian Orthodox, 30 percent is Muslim, 1 percent is Roman Catholic, and 3 percent is of other faiths (largely various Protestant denominations). There is also a small Jewish community in Skopje. Public participation in religious activities tends to center on major holidays or weddings and funerals.

Numerous foreign missionaries are active and represent a wide range of faiths. Many of these missionaries enter the country in connection with other work, often charitable or medical. Several Protestant missionary groups and members of Jehovah's Witnesses are active.

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. However, the law places some limits on religious practices, including the establishment of places of worship, the collection of contributions, and locations where religious rites may be held.

The constitutional provision for religious freedom is further defined by the 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups. This law designates the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Community, the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and the Methodist Church as religious communities. All other registered associations are considered to be religious groups. In 1998 and 1999, the Constitutional Court struck down several provisions of the 1997 law, including the requirement that religious groups must be registered to perform religious ceremonies. In practice, the remaining provisions are not enforced consistently.

The law requires that religious groups be registered to perform a number of activities. For instance, only registered religious groups may obtain permits to build churches or request visas for foreigners coming to the country to undertake religious work. The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups contained a number of specific requirements for the registration of such groups, but these requirements were struck down by the Constitutional Court in 1999. Consequently, there was considerable confusion over which procedures still applied. The law prohibits the registration of more than one group for each religious confession.

Regulations require that foreigners entering the country with the intent to carry out religious work or perform religious rites obtain approval from the State Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities and Groups to receive a visa. When applying for visas, such persons must submit a letter of invitation from representatives of a registered religious group in the country to the Commission, which then issues a letter of approval to be submitted with the visa request. Approvals were typically issued in less than a week. During the period covered by this report, there were no reports that any applications for religious visas were denied to qualified candidates of registered religious communities or groups.

However, a Polish-born nun associated with the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid claimed that, in September 2004, the Ministry of Interior declined to extend her residency permit because of her affiliation with that group. Since the law prevents registration of more than one group for each confession, the Ohrid Archbishopric has been denied registration and is thus not legally entitled to sponsor foreign religious workers.

The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups places some restrictions on the locations where religious ceremonies may be held. It provides that religious rites and religious activities "shall take place at churches, mosques, and other temples, and in gardens that are parts of those facilities, at cemeteries, and at other facilities of the religious group." Provision is made for holding services in other places, provided that a permit is obtained at least 15 days in advance. No permit or permission is required to perform religious rites in a private home. The law also states that religious activities "shall not violate the public peace and order, and shall not disrespect the religious feelings and other freedoms and rights" of other citizens.

Education laws restrict the establishment of all private primary schools, including parochial schools. However, there are no restrictions placed on religious education that takes place in religious spaces such as churches and mosques. Children below the age of 10 years may not receive religious instruction without the permission of their parents or guardians.

The Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups also places some limitations on the collection of contributions by restricting it to places where religious rites and activities are conducted. In practice, these provisions of the law are not enforced.

In May 2005, after a lengthy delay, the Ministry of Justice released a new draft law on religious communities and groups. The draft law proposed a transfer of the responsibility for registering religious groups to the judiciary from the State Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities and Groups. Parliament had taken no action on the legislation by the end of the period covered by this report.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion; however, restrictions contained in the Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups continued to be applied to a group known as the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid. Led by defrocked Macedonian Orthodox Church Bishop Jovan Zoran Vraniskovski, this schismatic group is recognized as an Archbishopric by the Serbian Orthodox Church and denies the Macedonian Orthodox Church's self-declared autocephaly (ecclesiastical independence, which is not recognized by other Orthodox churches).

In November 2004, the State Commission on Relations with the Religious Communities denied the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid's application to be registered as a religious group. It cited a number of grounds for the denial, noting that under the law only one group may be registered for each confession, and arguing that the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid's name was not sufficiently distinct from that of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. Similar arguments were used to reject the registration applications of two small Christian groups using the names "Church of Christ" and "Christian Meeting House" during the period covered by this report. The Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid's appeal to the Supreme Court, which followed two unsuccessful administrative appeals, was still under consideration in June 2005.

Representatives of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid alleged that, on May 1 2005, an Easter service held in a private residence was interrupted by police, who entered without a warrant and asked to see believers' national identification cards. This report could not be independently confirmed. They also alleged that, in January, at least two of their followers were summoned to the police station in Prilep and were interrogated about their support for the group. Complaints regarding the Prilep incident were lodged with the Ministry of Interior's Professional Standards Unit, which was investigating the matter. The group also claimed that 30 families that supported the group's registration application were visited and questioned by Macedonian Orthodox Church priests and policemen.

In July 2004, Zoran Vraniskovski, now recognized by the Serbian Orthodox Church as Archbishop of Ohrid, was convicted in a Bitola court on criminal charges and sentenced to 18 months in prison in August. On June 24, 2005, the Bitola Court of Appeals upheld the conviction and sentence. The charges alleged that his religious services, as well as his supposed publication and distribution of a religious calendar containing text considered offensive by members of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, violated the law by "inciting religious and ethnic hatred." The text of the calendar calls the Macedonian Orthodox Church "the last fortress of communism" and describes its believers as "heretics." He admitted to writing the text but not to producing and distributing the calendar. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) monitored the trial, but issued no public comment on the verdict. He was also accused of embezzling Macedonian Orthodox Church funds.

Vraniskovski's residence was vandalized in February 2004, and unknown intruders forcibly cut the hair of several nuns present. He claimed the attackers were state agents, but some speculated that his followers staged the attack to generate international sympathy.

He was also arrested and detained for 5 days in 2003 on charges of trespassing and disturbing the peace. He had attempted to baptize his niece at a Macedonian Orthodox church; authorities claimed his attempt to do so constituted trespassing since he had earlier been defrocked by the Macedonian Orthodox Church and therefore was not authorized to perform religious rites in that church.

The 1997 Law on Religious Communities and Religious Groups specifically allows foreign citizens to carry out religious activities, but only at the request of a registered religious body. During the period covered by this report, several individuals associated with such groups were able to obtain religious worker or other worker visas. In addition, officials delayed Serbian Orthodox Church Bishop Irinej in October 2004 as he tried to transit through the country to a meeting in Greece.

Churches and mosques often are built without the appropriate building permits; however, the Government normally does not take action against religious buildings that lack them. In the past, several Protestant groups have been unable to obtain building permits for new church facilities because of bureaucratic complications that affect all new construction. In October 2004, policemen demolished a small monastery that was being built by members of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid in Nizepole, near Bitola. The organization's lawyer conceded that the monastery was being constructed without a permit but noted that other buildings in the area, also built without permits, were not destroyed. At the end of the period covered by this report, the OSCE was unable to obtain a copy of the decision by the competent ministry authorizing the monastery's destruction.

The issue of restitution of religious properties expropriated by the former Yugoslav Government had not been fully resolved. Many churches and mosques had extensive grounds or other properties that were expropriated by the communist regime. Some progress was made in restitution of previously state-owned religious property. Virtually all churches and mosques have been returned to the ownership of the appropriate religious community, but that was not the case for many of the other properties. Often restitution or compensation claims are complicated by the fact that the seized properties have changed hands many times or have been developed. In view of the country's very limited financial resources, it was unlikely that religious communities would gain restitution of many of the expropriated properties.

The Jewish community continued to press for the full restitution of property confiscated by the former Yugoslav Government. In November 2004, representatives of the Jewish community met with Embassy representatives to discuss these concerns. The community received a partial decision restoring some of the disputed properties later the same month, and they plan to begin building a Holocaust Memorial Center on the site in September 2005. However, additional properties originally belonging to the community had not been returned by the end of the period covered by this report.

The Bektashi, a Sufi Islamic group, have sued the Government for not reversing the former Yugoslavia's nationalization of the Bektashis' Tetovo compound, the Arabati Baba Tekke. The Bektashi also have filed suit against the Macedonian Islamic Community, armed members of which seized part of the complex in 2002 and continue to occupy the mosque. These disputes were ongoing at the end of the period covered by this report.

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, and prominent religious leaders frequently spoke out in support of pluralism and religious tolerance. However, the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid's and the Serbian Orthodox Church's public rejection of and activism against the Macedonian Orthodox Church's independence provoked angry responses by the public, press, and the Government. The May 26, 2005, decision by the Serbian Orthodox Church to recognize the Serbian-aligned Ohrid Archbishopric as the "only canonical" Orthodox church in Macedonia caused outrage among the public, who viewed the decision as an attack on the country's national identity. The Government often sided with the Macedonian Church by applying the law against the Ohrid Archbishopric.

Religious differences in the country often correspond with ethnic identity. Specifically, most Muslims are ethnic Albanians. However, there are a number of ethnic Macedonians who are Muslim. Some ethnic Macedonian Muslims contended that the State sometimes confused them with ethnic Albanians and ethnic Turks because of

Muslim surnames and mixed marriages and, in some instances, assigned their children to Albanian language classes. However, societal discrimination is more likely to be based upon ethnic bias than upon religious prejudice.

There was one unverified report of a local journalist being verbally harassed by Macedonian Orthodox Church officials after interviewing Zoran Vraniskovski, whom the Serbian Orthodox Church recognizes as the Archbishop of Ohrid. The journalist stated to an Embassy representative that on June 27, 2005, a number of church officials insisted that he not air the interview, in which the leader of the Orthodox Archbishopric sharply criticized Macedonian church clergymen as "traitors." The report's broadcast was delayed by a day.

During the period covered by this report, there were isolated reports of vandalism of religious properties. Most such acts were directed against Orthodox cemeteries, where burial monuments were damaged or broken. In addition, the Bektashi compound in Tetovo, known as the Arabati Baba Tekke, was vandalized in July 2004. In that incident, a 20 year-old was charged with "defiling a grave" and "damaging monuments of cultural-historical significance."

Jewish leaders reported that there were no physical or verbal attacks against Jewish persons or property during the period covered by this report.

The Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid also claimed that one of the group's private chapels was vandalized four times since January, most recently on June 9, 2005. They alleged that religious artifacts were broken and that, in response to the vandalism, the police discouraged them from holding religious services there.

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.

During the period covered by this report, the Ambassador and Embassy staff met with leaders and representatives of the various religious communities, as well as with government officials, to address religious freedom issues and support the Government's policy of ethnic and religious tolerance.

The Ambassador and other Embassy representatives continued to follow the developments in the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid case, in close coordination with OSCE. The Ambassador and other Embassy officials have discussed the issue with the President, Prime Minister, and Church officials. On each occasion, the Embassy has urged respect for religious freedom and the rule of law, as well as moderation in language on both sides.

U.S. officials met with members of the Jewish community in December 2004 to discuss their concerns regarding the stalled restitution of properties granted to the Jewish Holocaust Fund in Macedonia, and then highlighted these concerns in subsequent meetings with government officials. By January 2005, sufficient property had been transferred to the fund to enable construction of a Holocaust Memorial Center in the former Jewish quarter of Skopje to begin.

Embassy officials also took part in events designed to foster religious tolerance, including a religious tolerance seminar conducted by an American Jewish scholar at a Muslim academy near Skopje and a lecture by a prominent Muslim scholar. The Ambassador also hosted an Iftar for celebrating Ramadan to promote understanding and cooperation with the Islamic community.

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