

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	77
Land:	Albanien
Kilde:	U.S. Department of State
Titel:	International Religious Freedom Report 2007
Udgivet:	1. juni 2007
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	14. september 2007



Albania

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

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

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

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious beliefs or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy continued to urge the Government to address religious property claims and return buildings, land, and other property to religious groups that lost them under communist rule.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 11,100 square miles and a population of 3.6 million. No reliable data were available on active participation in formal religious services, but estimates range from 25 to 40 percent. Despite such secularism, most citizens associate themselves with a traditional religious group. Citizens of Muslim background make up the largest traditional religious group (65 to 70 percent of the population) and are divided into two major 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). Bektashis are estimated to represent 25 percent of the 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 10 percent to Catholic communities.

Muslims are found throughout the country, while Orthodox followers are concentrated in the south and Catholics in the north. However, this division is not strict, particularly in many urban centers, which have mixed populations. Members of the Greek minority, concentrated in the south, belong almost exclusively to the Orthodox Church. In addition to the four traditional religious groups, there are substantial numbers of followers of Protestant denominations, Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and other religious groups.

The State Committee on Cults reported a total of 245 religious groups, organizations, and foundations in addition to the 4 traditional faiths. This number includes 34 different Islamic organizations and 189 Protestant (Christian) organizations, mostly associated with the Albanian Evangelical Alliance (VUSH).

Missionary groups are present in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Government is secular. According to the Constitution, there is no official religion and all religions are equal; however, the predominant religious communities (Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Catholic) enjoy a greater degree of official recognition (e.g., national holidays) and social status based on their historical presence in the country. Official holidays include holy days from all four predominant faiths.

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 registered religious groups have the right to hold bank accounts and own property. Religious movements may acquire the official status of a juridical person by

registering with the Tirana District Court under the Law on Nonprofit Organizations, which recognizes the status of a nonprofit association regardless of whether the organization has a cultural, recreational, religious, or humanitarian character. All religious communities have criticized the Government for its unwillingness to grant them tax-exempt status. Since 2003 foreign religious missionaries have been exempt from the residence permit tax.

The State Committee on Cults, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth, and Sports, is charged with regulating relations between the Government and all religious communities as well as protecting freedom of religion and promoting 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. No organization claimed any difficulty in obtaining residency permits during the period covered by this report. However, as a general rule, foreign religious missionaries were issued only 1-year residency permits instead of the 5-year permits allowed by law for residents in the country more than 2 years. During the period covered by this report, the Committee began working with the Government on criteria that would allow longer-term residency permits of up to 5 years for well-established religious organizations with long-term ties to the country.

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. The Catholic Church continued to be the only religious community that had finalized such an agreement with the Government. The Committee had a mandate to negotiate agreements with the three remaining groups and created a working group in May 2006 for this purpose. The Committee reportedly reached an agreement with three groups--the Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities. VUSH, a Protestant umbrella organization, approached the Committee to negotiate a bilateral agreement but had not received a response by the end of the reporting period.

The Ministry of Education states that public schools in the country are secular and that the law prohibits ideological and religious indoctrination. Religion is not taught in public schools. No restriction is imposed on how families raise their children with respect to religious practices. According to official figures, religious communities, organizations, and foundations managed 101 educational institutions, of which 15 were officially religious-affiliated schools, with more than 2,600 students. By law the Ministry of Education must license such schools, and curriculums must comply with national education standards. The Catholic and Muslim groups operated numerous state-licensed schools and reported no problems in obtaining new licenses for new schools. The Orthodox Church and the Bektashis operated strictly religious educational centers for the training of clerics.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion; however, restitution of property expropriated by the former communist government continued to be a problem. According to the law on the restitution of and compensation for such properties, religious communities have the same rights as private individuals in matters of property restitution or compensation, but the religious communities questioned the law's limitation on property restitution to 150 acres. During the reporting period, the Government had not established a special fund for monetary compensation, but the Prime Minister's Office consistently attempted to resolve religious property issues. The Government also announced plans to remove bureaucratic and legalistic hurdles that hindered the return of confiscated properties by eliminating the requirement that religious organizations produce titles and deeds to prove original ownership. During the communist era, properties confiscated by the regime generally were recorded, and the Government was working to recognize these archival documents as equivalent to property titles, thus clarifying land ownership in some cases.

All four major traditional communities had substantial property claims that remained unresolved. In cases involving the return of religious buildings, the Government often failed to return the land surrounding the buildings, sometimes because of redevelopment claims by private individuals who began farming it or using it for other purposes. The Orthodox Church continued construction of a new cathedral in Tirana on a parcel of land that it received as compensation for other land seized by the communist government, but it claimed a lack of action on other property claims throughout the country, as well as difficulty in recovering religious icons and precious manuscripts. Both the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church were trying to regain possession of archives seized by the communist government and held in the national archives.

Although the Catholic Church had substantial outstanding property claims, it indicated that it was not actively pursuing these and had decided to focus its efforts in other areas. Nevertheless, if compensation were eventually to be paid out to other religious groups, it would expect to receive compensation as well.

The Albanian Islamic Community and the Bektashis also requested that the Government return a number of properties. The Islamic Community succeeded in obtaining the title to a large parcel of land in Tirana where a mosque once stood. However, it did not receive a building permit for construction of a new mosque. Under the new Urban Regulatory Plan for Tirana, another parcel of land in Tirana, also owned by the Islamic Community, had been set aside for this purpose. The Islamic Community rejected this location as too small and continued to favor the original site. The problem remained unresolved at the end of the period covered by this report. The Bektashi community was also seeking compensation from the Government for victims of religious maltreatment during the communist regime.

The Orthodox Church's 1954 statute states that its archbishop must have Albanian citizenship; however, the archbishop was a Greek citizen who was seeking Albanian citizenship. During the period covered by this report, the Government did not take action on his citizenship application, submitted in 2003.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice, nor were any substantial acts of vandalism reported.

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. Embassy continued to urge the Government to address religious property claims and return buildings, land, and other property to the religious groups that lost them under communist rule. Embassy officers, including the chief of mission, met frequently with the heads of the major religious communities.

The Embassy was active in urging tolerance and moderation. The Embassy sponsored events at its American Corners geared towards high school and university students to promote interfaith understanding, including a photo exhibit and discussion on "Muslim Life in America." Using an embassy grant, the Civic and Faith-based Education Project expanded its activities throughout the country, bringing together local authorities, teachers, students, religious leaders, and civil society representatives to discuss ways of cultivating and reinforcing civic values to contribute to a more democratic, diverse, and tolerant society. The project introduced cooperative civic education curriculums into Muslim-affiliated schools in Tirana and continued to replicate this experience in other Muslim-affiliated schools throughout the rest of the country. The project also provided in-service training for teachers at local madrassahs that agreed to include civic education as part of their curriculum. The training offered knowledge and skills for effective civic education in their schools, which could help to further strengthen the relationship between civic and faith-based education, provide students in such schools with civic knowledge and skills, and improve the climate for further cooperation between public schools and faith-based nonpublic schools.

Through a U.S. Agency for International Development project, the U.S. Government supported the peaceful coexistence of different religious groups by fostering cooperation through interaction and dialogue. The project provided religious leaders and activists the skills and techniques to resolve conflicts among members of their own faith or between religious groups, and it provided technical assistance, training, and financial assistance through small grants to implement community development projects that promote dialogue. Finally, the project supported the efforts of the State Committee on Cults to develop agreements between the state and religious communities.

Released on September 14, 2007

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