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Albania

International Religious Freedom Report 2002

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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 the religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

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. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 11,100 square miles, and its population is approximately 3,490,000. It has a largely homogeneous ethnic population, consisting of Ghegs in the north and Tosks in the south. The southern part of the country has ethnic Greek communities estimated at 3 percent of the population. Other small minorities include the Roma, Egyptian people (an ethnic group similar to the Roma but which does not speak the Roma language), Vlachs, Macedonians, and Chams.

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 (roughly 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). The country is the world center of the Bektashi school, which moved from Turkey in 1925 after the revolution of Ataturk. Bektashis are concentrated mainly in the central and southern regions and 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 30 percent of the population belong to communities that are traditionally Albanian Orthodox, and 10 percent are associated with Roman Catholicism. 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 Albanian citizenship has been pending for several years.

Muslims are concentrated mostly in the middle of the country and to some extent in the south, Orthodox 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 a religion. Foreign clergy, 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 updated data provided by the State Committee on Cults during the period covered by this report, there are 22 different Muslim societies and groups active in the country; some of these groups are foreign. There are 36 Christian societies representing more than 100 different organizations and 2,500 to

3,000 Christian and Baha'i missionaries. The largest foreign missionary groups are 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, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic) function as juridical persons and enjoy a greater social recognition and 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.

Religious movements—with the exception of the four de facto recognized religions—may acquire the official status of a juridical person only by registering with the courts 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 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.

The State Committee on Cults, created by executive decision and based on the Constitution, is charged with regulating the relations between the State and religious communities. The Chairman of the Committee has the status of a deputy 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 development, 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; however, some foreign religious organizations have claimed that the Committee's involvement has not facilitated access to residence permits. There is no law or regulation that forces religious organizations to notify the Committee of their activities. There is no law on religious communities, although the Constitution calls for bilateral agreements between the State and religious communities. During the period covered by this report, the Committee coordinated the drafting of a model bilateral agreement for use in future negotiations with each religious community; it was under review by the Council of Ministers at the end of the period covered by this report.

According to official figures, there are 26 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 in order to ensure their compliance with national education standards, and the State Committee on Cults oversees implementation.

Official holidays include religious holidays from all four predominant faiths.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government is secular and religion is not taught in public schools. While there is no law restricting the demonstration of religious affiliations in public schools, students have not been allowed to do so in practice. In January 2001, three female Muslim students, Miralda Gjoka, Ermira Dani, and Edlira Dyrnisha, presented a case to the People's Advocate, claiming that their schools had prohibited them from wearing their headscarves. The Ministry of Education contended that public schools in the country were secular and that the law prohibited ideological and religious indoctrination. The case appeared to have been dropped by the end of the period covered by this report. No restriction is imposed on families regarding the way they raise their children with respect to religious practices.

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 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; however, it is developing a long-term compensation plan. Although it has recovered some confiscated property, including one large parcel of land near Tirana's main square, the Orthodox Church has claimed 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 January 2002,

on land provided by the Government.

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

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.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations among the various religious groups are generally amicable, and tolerance is widespread. Society largely is secular. Inter-marriage among religious groups is extremely common. There are amicable relations among the three main religions in the country, and religious communities take pride in the tolerance and understanding that prevails among them.

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. However, he concluded that the problem was largely due to the country's weak public order. There were three incidents of vandalism in the southern part of the country during the period covered by this report. Members of the ethnic Greek minority, as well as ethnic Albanian and Greek members of the Orthodox Church, left the country in large numbers between 1990 and 1991, with another large exodus between 1997 and 1998 due to the lack of security and poor economic prospects. Ethnic Greek Albanians, among others, continue to leave the country in search of employment or permanent residence elsewhere.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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 periodically has urged the Government to return church lands to the denominations that lost them under Communist rule. Embassy officers, including the Ambassador, 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 Government's Committee on Cults.

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