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2013 International Religious Freedom Report - Kosovo

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. Religious leaders stated the lack of a mechanism for religious groups to register and obtain legal status created a number of practical challenges in carrying out daily activities. Protestant and Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) officials reported ongoing problems with municipalities related to property rights and religious use of property.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. SOC officials also reported occasional incidents of theft and vandalism, including the desecration of numerous SOC cemeteries in January. Observers noted an increase in openly anti-Semitic rhetoric and greater public attention to factions within the Islamic community that promoted less tolerant views not congruent with the country's historically moderate and tolerant past. Conservative Muslim groups became more politically active, including in the country's first openly Islamist political party.

U.S. embassy representatives met with political and religious leaders to urge interfaith dialogue and encouraged resolution of religious communities' concerns. Embassy officials also pressed for the implementation of laws codifying protection for the SOC and supported efforts to resolve property disputes between the Visoki Decani Monastery and the local administration. The embassy funded cultural heritage preservation programs that included reconstruction and conservation of churches and mosques throughout the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.85 million (July 2013 estimate). Local census data identifies 95.6 percent of the population as Muslim, 2.2 percent as Roman Catholic, and 1.4 percent as Serbian Orthodox. Census categories for "other," "none," or "no response" each constitute less than 1 percent. The largest Catholic communities are in Gjakove/Djakovica, Kline/Klina, Prizren, Janjevo, and Prishtine/Pristina. Most SOC members reside in ethnically Serb towns and enclaves. Small Protestant populations live in most cities, with the largest concentration

located in Prishtine/Pristina. The Jewish community resides primarily in Prizren. The majority of the Muslim population belongs to the Hanafi school.

Religion and ethnicity are often linked, with Kosovo Serbs generally belonging to the SOC, while the majority of religiously active citizens of Albanian descent identify themselves as Muslim.

Critics of the national census note it does not include residents in the north and thus significantly underrepresents Kosovo Serbs who primarily belong to the SOC. Anecdotal information also suggests census takers, at times, automatically assigned Islam to persons as their religion without soliciting respondents' explicit answers or over their objections.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The law affirms the right to freedom of expression, conscience, and religion for all residents regardless of their religious convictions. It provides for the separation of religious communities from public institutions and for equal rights for all religious communities, stipulates the country does not have an official religion, and prohibits discrimination based on religion and ethnicity. No legal mechanism provides for registering religious groups. The constitution provides for an ombudsman's office that monitors religious freedom among other human rights.

The government provides safeguards for special protective zones (SPZs) based on religious and cultural significance by restricting nearby activities that could damage the surrounding historical, cultural, or natural environment. According to the law, an Implementation and Monitoring Council arbitrates disputes concerning SPZs and other matters related to religious and cultural heritage. The council composition includes government entities, three neutral international stakeholders, and a Serbian institute for cultural heritage protection.

An administrative directive issued in 2010 by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology prohibits primary and secondary students from wearing headscarves on school property. School officials selectively apply this directive.

Government Practices

Government authorities did not take steps to ensure that municipalities treated religious organizations equally on property issues, in particular with regard to churches and cemeteries.

Protestants alleged endemic and long-term institutional discrimination by the central and municipal governments, including not being allowed to establish their own cemeteries or build a church anywhere in the country. Protestants stated municipalities regularly ignored their requests for dedicated cemetery space, which resulted in imams performing funeral services for Protestants in

Muslim-controlled municipal cemeteries. They said this violated their religious rights and constituted the imposition of another religious tradition over their own.

Representatives of the Messiah Evangelical Church in Prishtine/Pristina stated that municipal authorities refused to issue a building permit for its church despite the church's work with municipal engineers to ensure the property and plans complied with legal requirements. Authorities did not resolve the problem during the year. Protestant leaders abandoned plans to establish a cemetery or build a church in Decan/Decani after assessing they could not obtain fair treatment from the municipality.

Decan/Decani municipal authorities and Privatization Agency of Kosovo representatives filed appeals against a 2012 Special Chamber of the Supreme Court ruling upholding the Visoki Decani Monastery's legal ownership of disputed land parcels. During the first four months of the year, local groups opposed to the court's findings sporadically engaged in public demonstrations near the monastery, which on February 8 led to its temporary closure for the first time in 13 years. On April 5, national politicians engaged in a related assembly debate about publicly owned properties: Numerous international observers issued statements condemning the inflammatory debate and rhetoric. SOC officials considered the agricultural land critical to the monastery's self-sustainability and future security. The court issued no ruling on the appeals by year's end.

Authorities allowed the construction of mosques throughout the country. Media reported the number of mosques increased to more than 800, up from 670 in 1999. The Prishtine/Pristina municipal government donated a 90-acre parcel of land in 2012 for a national mosque to the Kosovo Islamic Community (known by the Albanian-language acronym BIK), which represents the majority Hanafi population and appoints imams to mosques located throughout the country. Construction had not, however, begun by the end of the year.

The process of "unfixing," or transferring responsibility for the round-the-clock security of SOC religious sites from the NATO-led peacekeeping forces (Kosovo Force, known as KFOR) to the Kosovo Police (KP) continued, although the SOC objected to KP treatment of visitors at some monasteries. Police assumed complete responsibility for security at Pec Patriarchate, leaving only one site – the Visoki Decani Monastery – under KFOR protection.

In March the prime minister's office directed the formation of a KP Unit for Specialized Protection of Cultural and Religious Heritage Sites comprising 211 officers to provide 24-hour security at select sites around the country.

By October police had registered 18 incidents of theft and damage involving SOC facilities, primarily thefts of metal objects later sold for scrap and damage to cemeteries. Authorities recorded decreasing numbers of incidents at SOC sites every year since 2007, when they registered 90 incidents. SOC officials reported police dismissed or ignored numerous instances of petty and minor harassment of monasteries by neighbors, especially in the case of Devic Abbey in Drenica.

Religious leaders stated the lack of a mechanism for religious groups to register and obtain legal status created a number of practical challenges. Although many groups found alternative methods, some reported difficulties in registering property and vehicles, opening bank accounts, and paying taxes on employees' salaries.

The State Commission on Religious Freedom convened five times to develop a recommendation about headscarves and religious education in the country's schools.

BIK reported public schools prevented some students from attending classes while wearing headscarves. By October, BIK officials recorded two instances of girls in Prishtine/Pristina being denied entrance into public schools for wearing headscarves. The ombudsman's office received one report of schools forbidding students to attend classes while wearing headscarves.

The government undertook numerous interfaith initiatives to promote religious tolerance and respect between religious communities, beginning with the formation of *Interfaith Kosovo*, a web portal supported by the foreign ministry and international partners, including the Tony Blair Faith Foundation. The site promoted increased dialogue among religious communities, civil society, and the public. As part of that initiative, the government organized the "Interfaith Conference – Peje/Pec," which brought together religious leaders from the country's five primary religious groups and international interfaith participants.

In May the government for the first time hosted "Week of Tolerance" events, culminating in the first government-hosted international prayer breakfast with significant regional and international attendance. The government also unveiled a Holocaust memorial commemorating the deaths of Jewish community members during World War II, and noting the interreligious cooperation that prevented a higher death toll.

In July a former Justice Party official began collecting signatures in support of an amendment that would remove references to secularism from the constitution, omit explicit recognition of the Protestant and Jewish communities, oblige the state to recognize the autonomy of religious groups, require the state to cooperate with religious communities, and give religious groups the status of legal persons.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Close links between ethnicity and religion made it difficult to categorize some incidents as exclusively ethnically or religiously motivated. Leaders of different religious groups reported generally good relations with one another and participated in numerous interfaith discussions and initiatives.

In January vandals desecrated tombstones at SOC cemeteries around the country. The first incident occurred in Fushe Kosove/Kosovo Polje where 56 tombstones were defaced. On January 20-21, additional desecrations occurred at numerous Kosovo Serb cemeteries around the country, including Prizren, Klllokot/Klokot, Plemetina, Suvo Grlo, and Milosevo Village. In Prishtine/Pristina, the Plisat Football Club organized public events during which attendees chanted nationalist slogans and sang inflammatory songs, including "March will come again," in part a reference to 2004 riots which resulted in the desecration and destruction of 35 SOC churches around the country. Police arrested an Ashkali man in the first incident and stated that his motives were economic. Government officials condemned the desecrations and traveled to affected towns to offer support.

On January 31, the government allocated 97,000 euros (\$134,000) for repairing damage to the SOC cemeteries. Police in the Viti/Vitina municipality arrested five individuals in connection with damage to the local cemetery.

On April 15, Kosovo Albanian students verbally harassed a monk from the St. Kozma and Damjan Serbian Orthodox Monastery in Zociste, Rahovec municipality.

Internal changes at the BIK and a public perception of inconsistent policies and positions caused some to question the organization's moderate doctrinal foundations.

BIK elections prompted public debates about the organization's transparency. On August 21, BIK assembly members ousted Xhabir Hamiti from his position as president, after which the organization made internal changes that allowed Grand Mufti Naim Ternava to run for a previously prohibited third term. Media reports stated that Ternava's reelection on October 30 had resulted from sustained manipulation of the organization and its municipal representatives. Police investigated several death threats received by Hamiti during the same period, but did not identify suspects in connection with the threats.

Imam Shefqet Krasniqi of BIK's largest mosque, Pristina Grand Mosque, accused the Catholic community of hatred against Muslims, described women with disparaging language, and declared voting for certain political parties a "sin" in sermons widely disseminated via the internet and various media appearances,

In June BIK Imam Irfan Salihu's sermon branding women not opposed to premarital sex as "whores and sluts" prompted a public outcry. While Ali Vejza, the senior BIK imam in Prizren, distanced himself from Salihu's comments, the country's first openly Islamist political party, Levizja Bashkohu ("Islamic Movement Unite," LISBA) and an allied youth group expressed public support for the remarks. Senior government officials, including the Kosovo Assembly Women's Caucus, denounced the imam's comments and called for the BIK to distance itself from them. Female officials who spoke publicly against the imam's views faced additional public criticism and intimidating language. BIK representatives reported their internal disciplinary body issued Salihu a warning about his behavior. Imam Salihu continued to serve as head of Suzi Celebiu Mosque in Prizren during the year.

Observers noted a general increase in anti-Semitic rhetoric, most prevalently on the Internet. In a "Peace TV" web posting, editor-in-chief Enis Rama made numerous anti-Semitic statements including, "There is no other human being, tribe, clan, or race that is more devastating, more evil, or more troublemaking than the Jews." Under the title, "Israelis of the MFA," a local newspaper in September ran an op-ed piece criticizing the foreign minister for hiring two individuals the newspaper perceived as being Jewish.

On October 23, LISBA staged protests outside the parliament building in support of allowing headscarves in public schools. After the president commented on a television program she did not foresee the policy changing, numerous groups spoke out in opposition. One website referred to her as the "Jew-appointed President," and another suggested Allah should "harshly punish" 29 women who opposed changing the policy.

Media reports stated that a mosque built on land owned by LISBA leader Arsim Krasniqi served as a recruitment and transit center for extremists on their way to fight in Syria. LISBA Vice President Fatos Rexhepi in July made remarks on public broadcasting station RTK suggesting honor would accrue to young people fighting in Syria. In October media reports quoted anonymous security sources who estimated that extremists oversaw 30 of the country's mosques.

On November 13, following a high profile arrest of six individuals suspected of terrorism, the BIK issued a statement calling on any citizens fighting in Syria to return, saying the conflict "has nothing to do with religious principles and only prolongs President Asad's government and the suffering of the Syrian people." Police also charged two of the individuals with perpetrating a November 3 attack on two missionaries in Prishtine/Pristina.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives and visiting U.S. civilian and military officials met with political and religious leaders to urge religious tolerance. The Ambassador hosted an iftar, and numerous members of the embassy participated in interfaith initiatives and outreach with all religious communities.

Embassy officials regularly discussed religious freedom issues with leaders of the SOC and the Muslim, Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish communities and promoted interfaith dialogue. U.S. officials urged dialogue between SOC members and ethnically Albanian members of the government and civil society. The embassy also supported efforts to resolve the land dispute involving Visoki Decani Monastery and local groups, and discussed the property issues of other religious groups with government officials on at least four separate occasions.

The embassy funded preservation and restoration projects for culturally significant religious sites throughout the country, including churches in Velika Hoca/Hoqa e Madhe and a mosque in Prizren.

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