

ALBANIA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and religion. It stipulates there is no official religion, says the state is neutral in matters of belief, recognizes the equality and independence of religious groups, and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The government has agreements with the Sunni Muslim and Bektashi communities, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania (VUSH), a Protestant umbrella organization, pertaining to recognition, property restitution, and other arrangements. The law stipulates the faith communities will receive financial support from the government, but the government's agreement with the VUSH under the law does not specifically designate it to receive such funding. The government legalized 137 mosques during the year compared to six the previous year. Religious groups reported some progress on the hundreds of outstanding claims for government restitution or return of property seized during the communist era, and that the Agency for the Treatment of Property (ATP) met with them to begin reconciling lists of property claims. VUSH leaders stated their churches continued to have difficulties in acquiring land to construct places of worship and continued to face problems over tax payments. The prime minister announced a pilot project involving 10 schools aimed at promoting religious tolerance in secondary schools as a means of countering violent extremism.

The Interreligious Council, which is meant to function as a forum for the leaders of the country's religious communities to discuss common concerns, did not meet as it had in previous years. Pope Francis held an audience in Rome with the head of the global Bektashi community headquartered in Tirana, the first such audience for any religious leader from the country with the pope.

U.S. embassy officials continued to urge government officials to accelerate its handling of long-standing religious property claims and to return to religious groups the buildings, land, and other property confiscated from them during the communist era. The embassy expanded its civic education program, in which students of several religious educational institutions carried out projects celebrating religious diversity. The embassy also worked with the religious communities and nongovernmental actors to discourage violent extremism related to religion among youth and to promote religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2011 census, Sunni Muslims constitute nearly 57 percent of the population, Roman Catholics 10 percent, members of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania nearly 7 percent, and members of the Bektashi Order (a form of Shia Sufism) 2 percent. Other groups include Protestant denominations, Bahais, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and a small Jewish community. Nearly 20 percent of respondents declined to answer the optional question about religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates there is no official religion, all religions are equal, and the state has the duty to respect and protect religious coexistence. It declares the state is neutral in questions of belief and recognizes the independence of religious groups. According to the constitution, relations between the state and religious groups are regulated by agreements between these groups and the Council of Ministers and ratified by the parliament.

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and guarantees freedom of conscience, religion, and free expression. It states everyone is free to choose or change their religion or beliefs and to express them individually, collectively, in public, or in private. The constitution also states individuals may not be compelled to participate or excluded from participating in a religious community or its practices, nor may they be compelled to make their beliefs or faith public or be prohibited from doing so. It prohibits political parties or other groups from inciting religious hatred.

By law, the Office of the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination receives and processes discrimination complaints, including those concerning religious practice. The law specifies the State Committee on Cults, under the jurisdiction of the Office of the Prime Minister, regulates relations between the government and religious groups, protects freedom of religion, and promotes interfaith cooperation and understanding. The law also directs the committee to maintain records and statistics on foreign religious groups that solicit assistance, and support foreign employees of religious groups in obtaining residence permits.

The government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups, but to qualify for certain benefits, including opening a bank account, owning property, and obtaining some degree of tax-exempt status, a religious group must register with the district court as a nonprofit association. The registration process entails submission of information on the form and scope of the organization, its activities, the identities of its founders and legal representatives, the nature of its interactions with other stakeholders (e.g. government ministries and civil society organizations) in a particular field, the address of the organization, and payment of a 1,000 lek (\$8) fee to the district court. A judge is randomly assigned within 3 to 4 days of the submission of an application, and the process usually concludes within one session.

The government has agreements with the Sunni Muslim and Bektashi communities, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and the VUSH. The bilateral agreements serve to codify arrangements pertaining to official recognition, property restitution, tax exemptions on income, donations and religious property, and exemption from submitting accounting records for religious activities. A provision of law enacted in 2009 specifies the government will provide financial support to the four religious communities with which it has agreements dating from the same time. This provision of the law does not include the VUSH, whose agreement with the government dates from 2011. There is no provision of the law stipulating the VUSH should receive financial support from the government.

The law requires the ATP – previously the Agency for the Restitution and Compensation of Property – to address claims by religious groups for properties confiscated during the communist era.

The law allows religious communities to run educational institutions as well as build and manage religious cemeteries on land the communities own.

Public schools are secular, and the law prohibits religious instruction in them. Private schools may offer religious instruction. According to official figures, religious groups, organizations, and foundations have 125 affiliated associations and foundations managing 116 educational institutions, including universities, primary and secondary schools, kindergartens, vocational schools, and orphanages. By law, the Ministry of Education and Sport must license these institutions, and nonreligious curricula must comply with national education standards. Catholic, Muslim, and Orthodox groups operate numerous state-licensed kindergartens, schools, and universities. Most of these do not have mandatory religion classes,

but offer them as an elective. The Muslim community runs seven madrassahs that teach religion in addition to the state-sponsored curriculum.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

According to representatives of the Catholic, Sunni Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities, the total government financial support for these four groups remained at 109 million lek (\$850,000), the same as in 2015, with the Muslim community receiving a 28 percent share and the remaining three each receiving a 24 percent share. This support covered partial salaries for administrative and educational staff. For the Bektashi community, which had fewer staff, part of the support it received was used for new places of worship as well as for global outreach activities of its Tirana-based Bektashi World Headquarters.

Despite requests from the VUSH, the government continued not to provide it financial support. It did not amend the agreement with the VUSH to add the provision of financial support nor did it amend the law to include such financial support.

The government accelerated the process of legalizing unofficial mosques and issued 137 property certificates, compared to six in the previous year. The majority of these unregistered mosques had been built without permission during the 1990s. The government required endorsement from the Albanian Islamic Community (AIC) to legalize unofficial mosques.

Religious groups stated the government had made some progress addressing their claims for restitution or the return of property seized during the communist era. The government did not return any properties but approved partial compensation for 31 properties that had belonged to the Catholic Church, the AIC, and the Bektashi community. The government also stated some communities had not yet gone through the required step of requesting the funds.

Out of the many hundreds of claims submitted by the religious communities to the ATP since the fall of the communist regime in 1990, the vast majority remained unresolved. Religious groups continued to blame the slow progress with regard to the claims on government corruption, legal complexities stemming from the country's communist past, and competing claims for the same property from individuals or private organizations. The ATP acknowledged there was a problem

with the restitution process, saying the competing property claims and the constant restructuring and proliferation of government agencies involved in property disputes since the 1990s had left no agreement between the government and the religious communities on the number of valid property claims submitted over the past 25 years. The ATP met with the communities in March to begin reconciling lists of property claims and established a task force specifically to follow up on these claims.

The ATP reported it continued to budget funds for previous government decisions recognizing the rights of religious communities to numerous properties.

Although the government had promised to clear debris from a site in Dhermi where the local Inspectorate for the Protection of Territory had demolished an Orthodox church in August 2015, as of the end of the year the site remained untouched. A promise to find an alternate location for a new church had also gone unfulfilled. Authorities continued to state the Orthodox church had been built illegally on the site where a culturally significant 17th century church had stood. The Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania continued to protest the demolition.

VUSH members said they continued to rent existing buildings to use as places of worship, and reported continued difficulties in acquiring land on which to construct their own buildings due to local government tax assessments and regulations. They stated these difficulties impeded their ability to hold religious services and to run youth and social activities.

Construction continued on Bektashi places of worship in Korca, Permet, Gjirokaster, and Elbasan. Although the central government provided financial support to help build the properties in Permet and Gjirokaster, Bektashi representatives reported property disputes with some local government offices in these cities delayed progress.

In April Prime Minister Edi Rama announced a pilot project in 10 of the country's secondary schools to introduce a new curriculum aimed at promoting religious tolerance. The prime minister and minister of education stated the initiative would not affect the country's secular education system, and would serve as a way to counter violent extremism. Some religious communities expressed disappointment over what they saw as the limited consultation with them prior to the announcement. Religious leaders also expressed concern regarding the capacity of teachers to teach the new religious curriculum, as well as their own capacity to contribute to this initiative. While the government did not present a full version of

the new curriculum by year's end, it introduced elements of the new curriculum into the normal civics courses of several secondary schools.

VUSH leaders stated their churches continued to face problems early in the year concerning local tax requirements, particularly with regard to property taxes. In May VUSH reached an agreement with the Tirana municipality confirming VUSH's exemption from these taxes. Some local governments continued to assess fines for nonpayment of other taxes, such as sales taxes, however, and VUSH administrators frequently had to appeal these fines, with varying degrees of success.

Representatives from the Catholic, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities all continued to state their numbers were underrepresented in the 2011 official census, leading to an inaccurate picture of the religious demographics of the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Although an Interreligious Council existed for leaders of the country's religious communities to discuss common concerns, religious communities reported it had organized no meetings through the end of the year and did not function as a forum for discussion or for the issuance of joint statements, in contrast to previous years.

Some politicians continued to criticize the Archbishop of Tirana, Durres, and all Albania of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania over ties they perceived him to have with the Greek government.

Pope Francis held an audience on May 11 in Rome with Haji Dede Edmond Brahimaj, head of the global Bektashi community headquartered in Tirana. The audience was a first for any religious leader from the country with the pope.

On November 12, Grand Mufti Skender Brucaj, the leader of the Muslim community, welcomed the Israeli soccer team to the country for a World Cup qualifying game, citing the country's religious tolerance and harmony.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officers continued to meet with the state commissioner on cults and with the ATP to urge the government to accelerate its handling of religious property claims and to return to religious groups the buildings, land, and other property confiscated during the communist era.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to engage religious leaders and members of the Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant communities, and to visit churches, mosques, and religious sites to promote religious tolerance. The Ambassador hosted an iftar for members of these different communities where he stressed the value of religious dialogue and tolerance.

The embassy continued to work with religious communities, along with nongovernmental actors, to decrease the potential appeal of violent extremism connected with religion to the country's youth. The embassy continued its civic education program in which embassy officers spoke to students at Islamic, Catholic, and Orthodox religious schools, public high schools, and other educational institutions to promote tolerance. As part of the program, students of several religious educational institutions planned and carried out projects celebrating religious diversity. Additionally, seminars with key religious figures and discussions with leaders in government, law enforcement, and academia stressed the compatibility between democracy and religious faith.