

ALBANIA

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The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

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 religious participation or membership; the last official census including such data was conducted in 1939. The majority of citizens do not actively practice a faith; however, the four traditional religious groups are Muslim (Sunni), Bektashi (a form of Shia Sufism), Orthodox Christian (the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania), and Roman Catholic. In addition, there are numerous Protestant denominations and other religious groups, including the Bahai Faith, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons).

The State Committee on Cults reported more than 230 religious groups, organizations, foundations, and educational institutions operating in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. Citizens have the right to sue the government for violations of religious freedom.

By law the country is secular. According to the constitution, there is no official religion and all religions are equal; however, the Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Catholic communities enjoy a greater degree of recognition (e.g., national holidays) and social status based on their historical presence in the country.

On February 4, parliament approved a new antidiscrimination law. The law created the Office of the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, which is to receive and process complaints of discrimination. In May parliament named a commissioner. However, the new institution suffered from inadequate funding and staffing.

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 solicit its assistance. 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. Registration grants religious groups the right to hold bank accounts and own property, as well as some level of tax-exempt status. The four traditional religious communities signed agreements with the government in 2008 granting them wider tax exemptions and other privileges.

Article 10 of the constitution calls for separate bilateral agreements to regulate relations between the government and religious communities. The Catholic Church has had such an agreement with the government since 2002. In 2008 the government signed agreements with the Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities. The government signed a bilateral agreement with the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania (VUSH), a Protestant umbrella organization, on November 22. Among the advantages of having the agreement are an official recognition of the community, prioritized property restitution, and tax exemptions. Government financial support and state-subsidized clergy salaries were to be implemented based on a law on the financing of religious communities passed in June 2009. However, in practice there was little progress on restitution of religious properties.

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 religious communities, as well as protecting freedom of religion and promoting interreligious cooperation and understanding. The committee states that its records on religious organizations facilitate the granting of residence permits by police to foreign employees of various religious organizations. No organization reported any difficulty obtaining residency permits during the reporting period. Foreign missionaries were generally issued one-year residency permits initially, according to a new law governing the residency of all foreign citizens that passed in 2009. According to this law, foreign citizens receive one-year permits upon the first application, followed by two two-year permits. After this, such applicants may receive permanent residency permits.

According to the Ministry of Education, public schools are secular and the law prohibits ideological and religious indoctrination. Religion is not taught in public schools. According to official figures, religious communities, organizations, and foundations had 103 affiliated associations and foundations managing 101 educational institutions, of which 15 were officially religious-affiliated schools. By law the Ministry of Education must license these schools, and curricula must comply with national education standards. The Catholic and Muslim groups operated numerous state-licensed schools and reported no problems obtaining licenses for new schools. The Orthodox Church operated religious schools, a university, and educational centers for the training of clerics. The Bektashis also operated religious clerical training centers.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter (Catholic and Orthodox), Christmas, Major Bajram, Minor Bajram, and Nevruz.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

The government continued to address claims from each of the four traditional religious groups regarding the return or restitution of property seized during the former communist era; however, many of the property claims remained unresolved. With the 2008 bilateral agreements between the government and predominant religious groups, the State Agency for the Restitution and

Compensation of Property was instructed to give priority to properties owned by religious communities, although progress was slow.

The Orthodox Church continued construction of a new cathedral in Tirana--slated to be one of the largest in the Balkans--on land it received as compensation for land seized by the communist government. The church cited lack of action on other property claims throughout the country and noted it had a pending request for a new church in Vlore.

Both the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church included in their restitution claims religious icons and precious manuscripts seized by the communist government that remained in the national archives.

The Albanian Islamic Community continued to request building permits for a new mosque on land that was returned to the community through the post-communist restitution process. In late November municipal officials said publicly that they would accommodate longstanding requests to build a new mosque near Tirana's central square. However, by year's end no formal action had been taken.

There is no law prohibiting the wearing of religious clothing or symbols. School principals have the right to set standards for "appropriate clothing," which at times included restrictions on public displays of religious symbols. During the reporting period, there were reports school officials prevented female public high school students wearing Islamic headscarves from attending classes.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. No substantial acts of vandalism were reported.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

The ambassador and other embassy officials frequently engaged religious leaders in meetings, discussions, and events such as iftars (evening meals during

Ramadan) and roundtables. Embassy officials were active in promoting religious tolerance, engaging young persons, women, and other community members in joint activities such as seminars and community gatherings. During the reporting period, the embassy extended these efforts to three public high schools that work with madrassahs in the country on community-based initiatives.

Embassy officials continued to urge the government to address religious property claims and to return to religious groups the buildings, land, and other property confiscated from them by the communist government.