

CYPRUS

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. The constitution specifies that the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its holy canons and charter, and is exempt from taxes with regard to religious activity. The constitution recognizes three minority religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and “Latins” (Roman Catholics). The constitution also lays out guidelines for the Vakif, the Muslim institution that regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots, which similarly has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its laws and principles. However, the Vakif operated only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots during the year and did not administer mosques located in the government-controlled area, which served worshippers primarily from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During the year, embassy staff, including the chief of mission, met with officials, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and religious leaders from a variety of religious groups to discuss matters of importance to them. Additionally, embassy staff visited sites of religious significance.

Section I. Religious Demography

Prior to 1974, the country experienced a long period of strife between its Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities. In response the UN Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP) began peacekeeping operations in 1964. The island has been divided since Turkish military intervention in 1974. The southern part of the island is under the control of the government of the Republic of Cyprus (ROC), while the northern part is administered by Turkish Cypriots. In 1983 their administration

proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”). The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any other country except Turkey. A buffer zone, or “green line,” patrolled by the UNFICYP, separates the two parts. The area administered by Turkish Cypriots is discussed in a separate section in this report.

According to the most recent census information available (2001), 95 percent of the permanent population in the government-controlled area belongs to the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus. All other religious groups combined constitute less than 5 percent of the population and include Roman Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Maronite Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Jewish, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Baha’i, Buddhist, and other groups.

Recent immigrants and migrant workers generally practice religions different from those of native-born citizens, who are predominantly Greek Orthodox. There is a Buddhist meditation center in Nicosia and a synagogue in Larnaca; both are used primarily by foreign residents. The Jewish community, numbering approximately 2,150, includes a very small number of native Jewish Cypriots and a greater number of Jews who are part of the foreign resident community.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The constitution specifies that the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its holy canons and charter. By law, the Church of Cyprus is exempt from taxes with regard to religious activity and is required to pay taxes only on strictly commercial activities.

The constitution also lays out guidelines for the Vakif, the Muslim institution that regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots, which similarly has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with its laws and principles. No legislative, executive, or other act may contravene or interfere with the Church of Cyprus or the Vakif. However, the Vakif operated only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots during the reporting year and did not administer mosques located in the government-controlled area. Mosques in government-controlled areas serve worshippers primarily from Africa, Asia, and

the Middle East, and receive financial support from the government and, in previous years, from Libya.

The constitution recognizes three minority religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and “Latins” (Roman Catholics). These groups are also exempt from taxes and are eligible, along with the Church of Cyprus and the Vakif, for government subsidies for their religious institutions.

The 1975 Vienna III Agreement remains the basic agreement covering treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronites living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots living in the government-controlled area. Among other provisions, this agreement provides for facilities for religious worship.

In 2010 the minister of education, other government officials, and the teachers union approved the government’s policy that all students have the equal right to use religious symbols, including wearing headscarves, at school.

Religious groups that are not among the five recognized ones are not required to register with the government. If, however, they want to engage in financial transactions and maintain bank accounts, they must register as nonprofit organizations. In order to register, a group must submit through an attorney an application that states the purposes of the nonprofit organization and provides the names of the organization’s directors. Upon approval, nonprofit organizations are tax-exempt and are required to provide annual reports. The Ministry of Commerce reported that no religious groups were denied registration during the reporting year.

There is no prohibition against missionary activity or proselytizing in the government-controlled area. Foreign missionaries must, however, obtain and periodically renew residence permits to live in the country, but renewal requests normally are approved, despite some applicants experiencing delays.

The government requires children in public primary and secondary schools to take instruction in the Greek Orthodox religion. Primary school students of other religions may be exempted from attending religious services and instruction at the request of their guardians. Students in secondary education may be exempted from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience, and may be exempted from attending religious services on any grounds at the request of their guardians, or their own, if they are over the age of 16. The request is submitted by the parent/guardian or the student if over 16 to the Ministry of Education, which issues

instructions to the school to grant the exemption. The Jehovah's Witnesses, the largest group that requests exceptions and which in the past had complained about delays and other problems, reported in 2011 that the situation improved, the process is simple, and exemptions are granted promptly in the majority of cases.

Missionaries have the legal right to proselytize, but it is illegal for a missionary to use "physical or moral compulsion" to make religious conversions. Police may investigate missionary activity based on a citizen's complaint.

Conscientious objectors are exempt from active military duty and from reservist service in the National Guard. They are, however, required to complete an alternative to military service, which can be performed as a civic assignment. In contrast to previous years, the ombudsman's office did not receive any complaints from conscientious objectors about the procedures used by the government to confirm their conscientious objector status and eligibility for alternative military service. The international nonprofit organization Conscience and Peace Tax International and the Jehovah's Witnesses reported that the stipulated duration of alternative service for conscientious objectors was punitive compared to military service.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Annunciation, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Holy Spirit Day (Pentecost), Assumption, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

During the year, Jehovah's Witnesses stated that exemptions from religious instruction were generally granted promptly, with the exception of two new cases in which there were slight delays in confirming the exemption. Jehovah's Witnesses also reported that their members' children did not experience difficulties in being exempted from attending school performances containing religious content.

Although nonprofit registrations generally were granted promptly, some religious groups including members of the Baha'i Faith, reported difficulties registering as nonprofit charities and stated that the government was unresponsive to inquiries regarding the status of applications. The difficulties with registration prevented

them from being able to open bank accounts or arrange for tax-deductible donations.

Turkish Cypriots enjoyed relatively easy access to religious sites in the government-controlled area. A Turkish Cypriot authority reported, however, that Turkish Cypriot cemeteries and mosques in the villages of Kosi and Aplanda in the Larnaca district were inaccessible because they reportedly were within Greek Cypriot military camps. Moreover, Turkish Cypriot authorities stated Greek Cypriot maintenance of mosques was limited to monuments in the main city centers and tourist areas, and other unused mosques in the government-controlled area were neglected. In addition, Turkish Cypriots stated that access to Hala Sultan mosque, one of the holiest Muslim sites worldwide, was limited to conventional museum hours by the Ministry of Communications and Works' Department of Antiquities.

The Ministry of Interior 2011 budget for the restoration and maintenance of Muslim places of worship was 814,300 euros (\$1,054,152). Additionally, the Department of Antiquities 2011 budget for the same purpose was estimated at 330,000 euros (\$427,414). All budgets include labor costs.

The Buddhist community continued to face difficulties finding a site for a permanent temple. The community purchased land outside of Nicosia, but found that building regulations allowed for only 6 percent of the land to be used for habitable structures. The community applied for a variance from the regulation, but the minister of the interior denied it and counter-proposed an exchange of the land for government land. In September the application for the exchange was accepted. In the meantime, the community used a meditation center in Nicosia as a temple.

The Baha'i community reported that, as in previous years, it often faced difficulty burying its dead, as cemeteries generally exist only for recognized religious groups. As a result, Baha'i burials took place in cemeteries for foreign residents used by other denominations.

Several religious groups reported difficulties obtaining visas and residency permits from the government for clergy and student volunteers from countries outside the European Union. Applications and renewals were not processed in a timely manner, and some groups reported that, as a result, some members were forced to leave the country rather than risk being blacklisted for staying in the country illegally.

During the military swearing-in ceremony, Church of Cyprus clergy lead a common prayer. Recruits may be excused from taking part in the prayer, but minority religious groups reported that this option was rarely used because recruits did not want to attract negative attention.

There were no complaints from prisoners in the Open Prison (a special detention section of the ROC's Central Prison where low-risk prisoners receive special privileges) concerning a lack of adequate religious facilities. An expansion of the Open Prison, however, did not include construction of religious facilities. Inmates in the Open Prison were permitted to visit the mosque and the church located in the closed part of the Central Prison, but only at times different from those permitted for other the inmates.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On November 3, 620 Turkish Cypriots made a pilgrimage at the Hala Sultan Mosque to celebrate Kurban Bayram. It was the first time since 1960 that Kurban Bayram was celebrated at this mosque.

In June the bicomunal Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage established a joint team of technical experts to prepare plans for the restoration of priority monuments in both the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and the government-controlled area.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Anecdotal evidence provided by a human rights NGO indicated that women wearing headscarves encountered more difficulties finding employment, that some landlords were reluctant to rent apartments to Muslim migrants, and, in general, that derogatory language was sometimes employed towards Muslim migrants.

Some representatives of the Jewish community reported that their members were verbally harassed on various occasions throughout the year.

Some religious groups reported that students occasionally experienced negative reactions from teachers and fellow students when they exercised their rights of exemption from religious instruction. Anecdotal evidence suggested that attitudes

of fellow students, primarily, and, in some isolated cases, teachers, had not changed.

Some religious groups also reported that Greek Cypriots who converted from the Greek Orthodox religion to other faiths faced social ostracism. However, relations between the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus and other religious communities in the government-controlled area were generally cordial.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In the context of its reconciliation programs, the U.S. government supported the work of coalitions that included religious communities seeking to preserve cultural heritage sites, including historic churches and mosques, and promote joint action and mutual respect. Throughout the year, embassy staff, including the chief of mission, met with officials, NGOs, international organizations, and religious leaders of many religions to discuss matters of importance to them. Additionally, embassy staff visited sites of religious significance.

AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Executive Summary

Since 1974 the northern part of the island has been administered by Turkish Cypriot authorities. In 1983 it proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”). The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any other country except Turkey. The “basic law” and other “laws” in the area generally protect religious freedom; however, the politically divisive environment has resulted in restrictions on religious freedom in practice, particularly for Greek Cypriot Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Maronite Christians. The “law” refers specifically to a “secular republic” and does not recognize any specific religion. It states, however, that the Vakif, which regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots, has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with Vakif laws and principles. The Vakif is tax-exempt in its religious activities, but its commercial operations are subject to applicable taxes. It also receives income from properties it manages. No other religious organization in the area is tax-exempt.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice in the area.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with Turkish Cypriot “officials” as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During the year, embassy staff, including the chief of mission, also met with NGOs, international organizations, and religious leaders of a variety of religions to discuss matters of importance to them. Additionally, embassy staff visited sites of religious significance.

Section I. Religious Demography

In the area administered by the Turkish Cypriots, nominally 98 percent of population is Sunni Muslim. An estimated 10,000 mostly immigrant workers from Turkey of Turkish, Kurdish, or Arab origin, are Alevis. There are also followers of other schools of Islam. There is a Turkish Cypriot Baha’i community of approximately 200 persons, a small Jewish community of foreign expatriates, a Russian Orthodox Church of approximately 200 persons, and a Jehovah’s Witness community of approximately 40 members. Most non-Muslims residing in the area are foreigners from Western Europe who are generally members of the Roman Catholic or Anglican churches.

The large majority of the secular Turkish Cypriot community observes Islamic holidays through cultural events and family gatherings, rather than attending service or through specifically religious ceremonies. This is in contrast to students, residents, immigrants, and workers of Turkish, Kurdish, or Arab origin who celebrate and practice most of the spiritual and traditional aspects of their religions through mosque services.

Section II. Status of “Government” Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The “basic law” and other “laws” and policies in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots generally did not protect religious freedom. The “law” refers specifically to a “secular republic.” The “law” does not recognize any specific religion. It states, however, that the Vakif, which regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots, has the exclusive right to regulate and administer its internal affairs and property in accordance with Vakif laws and principles. The Vakif is tax-exempt in its religious activities, but its commercial operations are subject to applicable taxes.

It also receives income from properties it manages. No other religious organization in the area is tax-exempt.

The 1975 Vienna III Agreement covers the treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronites living in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots living in the government-controlled area. Among other provisions, the agreement provides for facilities for religious worship, stating that “the Greek Cypriots at present in the north of the island are free to stay and they will be given every help to lead a normal life, including facilities for education and for the practice of their religion, as well as medical care by their own doctors and freedom of movement in the north.”

Religious organizations are not required to register with authorities unless they wish to engage in commercial activity or apply for tax-exempt status.

There are no provisions or “laws” allowing Turkish Cypriots to engage in conscientious objection to military service.

The following holy days are observed widely in the Turkish Cypriot community: Ramadan Bayram, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Kurban Bayram.

“Government” Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. The politically divisive environment has resulted in restrictions on religious freedom, particularly for Greek Cypriot Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Maronite Christians.

Some religious groups reported that their activities were monitored by Turkish Cypriot authorities, including “police,” and the monitoring was perceived as intimidation and harassment. They reported increased police presence, compared to previous years, during church services. A resident Greek Cypriot Orthodox priest reported that the “police” were questioning him with increased frequency about his activities.

Greek Cypriot Orthodox and Maronite Catholics continued to be prohibited from visiting most religious sites located in military zones in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. The Jewish community reported that a cemetery remained inaccessible, due to its location in a military zone.

In February, authorities in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots revised regulations related to religious services for Greek Cypriot Orthodox and Maronite Catholics residents. Turkish Cypriot authorities announced that Greek Cypriots and Maronite Catholics resident in the north could hold liturgies or masses conducted by designated priests at designated churches in their areas of residence without seeking permission. Permission is required for religious services to be held at churches or monasteries other than those six designated by authorities, for religious services conducted by priests other than those with official designation, and for services that include participants who are not residents in the area.

Some religious groups complained that authorities often took several months to respond to requests for permission to conduct ceremonies, often not providing answers until only days before the requested dates. A Greek Cypriot Orthodox Bishop reported that an April 7 request to conduct a liturgy at the Church of Saint George on April 25 was denied only on April 20, without justification. A second request submitted on May 5 to conduct a liturgy at the same church on June 4 was denied on May 31, with the explanation that the church had been handed over to the “TRNC Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports” for use as a youth center.

In March Turkish Cypriot officials at Pergamos crossing point stopped a car with three Greek Cypriot passengers and confiscated 204 religious books, reportedly destined for students and faculty of the Greek Cypriot schools in the north.

The Turkish Cypriot authorities did not allow a Greek Cypriot Orthodox bishop, whose authority is not recognized by Turkish Cypriot officials, to lead services during July, August, and November.

Turkish Cypriot Murat Kanatli has declared his conscientious objection to the one-day annual reserve duty requirement since 2009. In June he appeared in “military court” on charges relating to his refusal to serve. In December, the “Military Court” in the north referred the case to the “Constitutional Court” on the basis of freedom of thought and expression provisions. The case has prompted several additional declarations of conscientious objection.

Some groups complained that some religious sites, to which they had little or no access, were damaged or close to collapse. The most recent reports indicate that Turkish Cypriot authorities have spent 546,430 Turkish lira (\$346,000) since 2006 to complete the restoration of 15 Greek Cypriot Orthodox churches in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. Some Greek Cypriot Orthodox and Maronite

churches were converted to other uses. One religious group complained that religious items were being held in museums against the wishes of the community.

While Turkish Cypriot authorities facilitated the construction of a number of mosques with funding from Turkey, construction of facilities for non-Sunni Muslims remained unfunded even though some groups lacked facilities.

Alevis, recognized by Turkish Cypriot authorities as only an association and not as a religious group, reported they were unable to build a cem evi (house of worship) for gatherings due to lack of funding. They also reported that due to “regulations,” as well as lack of a house of worship, they were required to conduct funerals inside mosques, contrary to their traditions. As an alternative, the Alevis were raising funds for the construction of a cultural center and place of worship through private donations.

A Turkish-speaking Protestant congregation reported that authorities continued to be unresponsive to the group’s application to obtain legal status as an “association,” and reportedly requested that the congregation provide 15 potential names for their association that did not include any religious words. The group’s inability to register to date prevented them from establishing a trust fund and purchasing property.

There is compulsory instruction in religion, culture, and ethics in grades four through eight in all schools. At the high school level, such instruction is optional. There is no formal Islamic religious instruction in public schools. There are no “state-supported” religious schools.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Greek Cypriots continued to report that vandals damaged vacant Greek Orthodox churches and removed religious icons in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. According to Turkish Cypriot authorities, “police” closely investigated all such complaints of vandalism.

In May, the 200-year-old Greek Orthodox Chapel of Saint Thekla was demolished, reportedly by accident. The Turkish Cypriot authorities publicly condemned the demolition and announced they would rebuild it. The driver of the bulldozer that

demolished the chapel was fined 250 Turkish liras (140 USD) and ordered to pay 40,000 Turkish liras (22,468 USD) as compensation to the “antiquities department.” At the end of the year, the “antiquities department” had yet to begin restoration.

A “state-supported” religious department opened in November at a high school was vehemently protested by many teacher unions who support secular education as a key part of Turkish Cypriot identity.

In a largely secular community, Turkish Cypriot religious authorities reported that Muslim parents seeking to send their children to attend religious summer courses on a voluntary basis faced strong public criticism, particularly from local teachers.

Some religious groups reported that Turkish Cypriot converts from Islam to other religions faced social ostracism and, in at least one instance, job loss from a private sector position that they claimed was caused by their religious conversion. This group did not provide specific evidence to support this claim.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with Turkish Cypriot authorities as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In the context of its reconciliation programs, the U.S. government supported the work of coalitions that include religious communities seeking to preserve cultural heritage sites, including historic churches and mosques, and to promote joint action and mutual respect. Throughout the year, embassy staff including the chief of mission met with officials, NGOs, and religious leaders of many faiths to discuss matters of importance to them. Additionally, embassy staff visited sites of religious significance.