

GREECE

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom and took measures designed to address concerns. The primary issue remained the degree to which religious groups are afforded the same privileges and legal prerogatives granted the Orthodox Church. The government demonstrated a moderate trend toward improvement in respect for protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. The Greek Orthodox Church exercised significant social, political, and economic influence. Some non-Orthodox citizens complained of being treated with suspicion or being told they were not truly Greek when they revealed their religious affiliations to other Greek citizens. Other religious groups reported discrimination by members of society. Members of the Muslim minority in Thrace were underrepresented in public sector employment and no Muslim military personnel advanced to officer ranks.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The ambassador and consul general in Thessaloniki met with government and religious leaders on a regular basis. They also hosted iftars (evening meals during Ramadan) attended by a broad range of government, community, diplomatic, nongovernmental organization (NGO), media, academic, and religious leaders, and attended Holocaust memorial events.

Section I. Religious Demography

The government does not keep statistics on religious groups. An estimated 98 percent of the population, however, identifies itself as Greek Orthodox. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne created an officially recognized “Muslim minority,” which consists of an estimated 140,000 to 150,000 individuals (approximately 1.3 percent of the Greek population) residing in Thrace. The remaining population is composed of Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Old Calendarist Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Scientologists, Baha’is, Hare Krishna devotees, and followers of polytheistic Hellenic religions. Church leaders estimated that 30 percent of self-identified Orthodox regularly participates in religious services.

NGOs estimate that between 500,000 and 700,000 Muslims reside in Attica as a result of longstanding migration from Albania and a recent influx of illegal immigrants and refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, North Africa, and South Asia.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected this right. In July the government appointed a secretary general for religions at the Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning, and Religious Affairs. The government recognizes the canon law of the Orthodox Church, both within the church and in areas of civil law such as marriage. Privileges and legal prerogatives granted to the Orthodox Church are not extended routinely to other religious groups. Citizens and registered organizations can sue the government for violations of religious freedom. The constitution and law prohibit proselytizing.

The government supports the Orthodox Church financially. For example, the government pays for the salaries and religious training of Orthodox clergy, partially finances the maintenance of Orthodox Church buildings, and provides a tax exemption for the Orthodox Church's property revenues. Orthodox religious instruction in primary and secondary schools, at government expense, is mandatory for all students, although non-Orthodox students may exempt themselves by turning in a statement requesting exemption. However, public schools offer no alternative activity or non-Orthodox religious instruction for these children. Many private schools offer alternative religious instruction to their students.

The law requires that all civil servants take a religious oath before entering office. Persons not belonging to the Orthodox Church may take an oath in accordance with their own beliefs or on their honor.

As interpreted, the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne gives the Muslim minority in Thrace the right to maintain social and charitable organizations called auqafs, allows muftis (Islamic jurists) to render religious judicial services in the area of family law, and provides certain rights that the government must protect such as bilingual education, government salaries for Muslim religious leaders, operation of mosques and auqafs, and the recognition of Sharia in family law.

In Thrace the government operates secular bilingual schools and two Islamic religious schools. The government gives special consideration to Muslim minority students from Thrace for admission to universities and technical institutes, setting aside 0.5 percent of the total number of places for them annually and implementing a program during university entrance exams that accepts lower scores.

The government maintains that Muslims living outside Thrace are not covered by the Treaty of Lausanne and therefore do not enjoy the rights provided by the treaty to Muslims residing in Thrace. Some Muslims on the Dodecanese Islands assert that they deserve the recognition and rights provided under the treaty.

The government grants Muslims in Thrace the right to choose Sharia law to regulate family and civic issues such as marriage, divorce, custody of children, and inheritance. Members of the Muslim minority in Thrace, however, can choose instead to have civil marriages and take cases to civil court rather than follow Sharia. Muslims married by government-appointed muftis are subject to Sharia family law but may appeal to the courts for a hearing under secular law.

The muftis in Thrace make judicial decisions based on Sharia, most of which has not been translated into Greek, limiting the ability of government courts to provide judicial oversight. Courts in Thrace routinely ratify the decisions of the muftis, who have judicial powers in civil and domestic matters. The National Human Rights Committee (an autonomous government advisory body), human rights organizations, and some media reports have argued that the government should limit the powers of the muftis to religious duties only and not recognize Sharia because it may restrict the civil rights of some citizens, especially women, particularly in child custody, divorce, and inheritance cases. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights also has expressed concern regarding impediments that Muslim women in Thrace face under Sharia.

Some groups, such as the Jewish community, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baha'is, have requested treatment equal to that of the Orthodox Church with regard to legal status and financial support from the government. Leaders of non-Orthodox religious groups state that taxes on their organizations are discriminatory because the government subsidizes Orthodox Church activities and does not tax the Orthodox Church's property revenues. Members of many religious groups have stated that the government should tax and subsidize all religious entities on the same basis.

The Orthodox Church, Jews, and Muslims are the only religious groups the government recognizes as “legal entities of public law,” entitled to own, bequeath, and inherit property and appear in court under their own names. Other religious organizations must be registered as “legal entities of private law” and cannot own houses of prayer (approved places of worship) or other property as religious entities. In order to own property, they must create other corporate legal entities (such as nonprofit associations) to own, bequeath, or inherit property, or to appear in court. To be recognized as a religious “legal entity of private law,” a religious group must represent a “known religion” or dogma. Court rulings define “known religions” as having publicly taught doctrines with rites of worship open to the public, being nonprofit in nature, not affecting public order or morality adversely, and having a clear hierarchy of religious authorities.

The Ministry of Education and Religion indirectly recognizes groups as “known religions” by issuing house of prayer permits to them. A separate permit is required for each physical place of worship, but a religious group with at least one valid permit is considered a known religion and is protected under freedom of religion laws. Some religious groups, including Catholics, Pentecostals, Baha’is, Methodists, Mormons, evangelical Protestants, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, are recognized as known religions. Other groups, including Scientologists, Hare Krishna devotees, and polytheistic Hellenic religious groups, have applied for but never received house of prayer permits.

Some religious groups face additional legal and administrative burdens because they cannot function as religious legal entities. Scientologists and members of polytheistic Hellenic religious groups practice their faiths as registered nonprofit civil law organizations. Without the recognition afforded by house of prayer permits, weddings officiated by religious leaders are not recognized legally. To receive house of prayer permits, applicants must receive approval from the local urban planning department, attesting that a place of worship meets city planning regulations and “safe congregation” requirements prior to filing an application with the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs.

Catholic churches and related religious bodies established prior to 1946 are legally recognized as private entities, but Catholic institutions established after 1946 are not extended the same automatic recognition. The Catholic Church continues to seek government recognition of its canon law but had not succeeded by year’s end.

The constitution prohibits proselytizing and stipulates that no rite of worship may “disturb public order or offend moral principles.”

The law provides penalties for “whoever intentionally incites others to actions that could provoke discrimination, hatred, or violence against persons or groups of persons on the basis of their race or ethnic origin or expresses ideas insulting to persons or to groups of persons because of their race or ethnic origin.” The law allows any prosecutor to order the seizure of publications that offend Christianity or any other religion. The government did not enforce these laws during the year.

The country has mandatory military service of nine months for male citizens between the ages of 18 and 45. Citizens go into “reservist” status following this service. Mandatory military service is three months for “repatriated” male citizens (those of Greek ethnic background who emigrated from the former communist bloc) and five months of alternative service for repatriated conscientious objectors. The law provides for alternative forms of mandatory service for religious and ideological conscientious objectors. Conscientious objectors may, in lieu of mandatory military service, work in state hospitals or municipal and public services for a period two times the length, minus one month, of the required military service (17 months). A January Supreme Court decision allowed citizen reservists who had already completed military service to receive conscientious objector status subsequently if called back for service. Some religious groups claimed the increased length of mandatory service required of conscientious objectors was discriminatory, and during the year Jehovah’s Witnesses had six pending cases in front of the Supreme Court on different issues related to conscientious objection.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Clean Monday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Easter Monday, Holy Spirit Day, the Assumption of Mary, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were some reports of abuses and restrictions of religious freedom.

Orthodox officials have an exclusive institutionalized link to the Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs, while several other religious groups reported difficulties in dealing with authorities on a variety of administrative matters.

In October a Court of Appeals in Rethymno, Crete, convicted an individual to four months in prison and an 840 euro (\$1,176) fine for violating the law against proselytism. He paid a fine in lieu of prison time.

In 2006 the Supreme Administrative Court dismissed on technical grounds an appeal by Jehovah's Witnesses over property taxation of their headquarters. When the area was rezoned, Orthodox Church properties were exempt from rezoning fees; the Jehovah's Witnesses claimed that, as a "recognized religion," they should also be exempt. The case remained pending at year's end.

A legal case challenging an Orthodox Church bishop's claim that Jehovah's Witnesses cannot use the word "Christian" on their house of prayer permits has been pending before the Supreme Administrative Court since 2005.

Leaders of some religious groups considered that the system of house of prayer permits constrained freedom of religion administratively and noted that under the existing legal framework unregistered religious organizations are subject to government prosecution, although there were no reports of prosecutions. The Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs issued 13 house of prayer permits to "known religions" during the year. Applications for two minarets and one mosque were pending at year's end.

After a delay, government-funded restoration of the Catholic Cathedral of Athens, damaged in a 1998 earthquake, began.

Members of the Muslim minority in Thrace were underrepresented in public sector employment and in state-owned industries and corporations. A law exists to assign 0.5 percent of civil service jobs to Muslims. At year's end, two members of the Muslim minority from Thrace held seats in the three hundred seat parliament. In Xanthi and Komotini, Muslims held seats on the prefectural and town councils and served as local mayors.

The government continued to claim that auqafs in Thrace owed interest on their tax debt (the principal was written off by the government), totaling approximately one million euros (\$1.3 million). Members of the Muslim minority protested the government's position and lobbied for the interest to be written off as well.

Differences remained among some members of the Muslim minority community and the government regarding the process of selecting muftis and imams. By law the government, in consultation with a committee of Muslim leaders, appoints all three muftis in Thrace to 10-year terms of office with the possibility of extension. The muftis in Xanthi and Komotini began serving in 1991 and 1985, respectively.

Both were due to retire during the year, but the government extended the term of the mufti of Komotini indefinitely.

The government continued to maintain it has the right to appoint muftis since they perform judicial Sharia functions and all judges in the country are appointed by the government. Some members of the Muslim minority objected to the government's appointment of muftis and continued to lobby the government to allow the direct election of muftis by the community without proscribing their judicial powers. Some members of the Muslim minority accepted the authority of the government-appointed muftis, but others chose two unofficial muftis to serve their communities. These two muftis were not recognized by the government and did not have civil authority.

Muslim leaders in Athens criticized the absence of a government funded mosque and recognized Muslim clergy in the city. Muslims in Athens worshipped in approximately 120 informal (unregistered) mosques operating in legal cultural halls, and they traveled to Thrace for official Islamic marriages and funerals.

In December Metropolitan of Piraeus Seraphim filed charges against the Catholic Church for proselytism. The metropolitan argued that the blessing of the school year by a Catholic priest in the presence of both Catholic and Greek Orthodox students constituted proselytism of the Greek Orthodox children.

Some Muslim leaders complained about the lack of a Muslim cemetery in Athens, stating that municipal cemetery regulations requiring exhumation of bodies after three years contravened Islamic religious law.

Members of several religious organizations complained about the lack of crematory facilities. A law permitting the establishment of crematory facilities was passed in 2006, and a presidential decree was signed during the year. However, it was not implemented by year's end.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

During the year, the government took steps to improve religious freedom. Under the leadership of the newly appointed secretary general for religions at the Ministry of Education, Life-Long Learning, and Religious Affairs, the government provided spaces to some of Athens' Muslim communities whose members had requested places of worship for Ramadan and other religious occasions, unlike in the

previous year. At one Ramadan celebration, the secretary general made a public statement underscoring Muslims' rights to worship.

On September 7 parliament approved a provision to begin construction on a government-funded mosque in Athens, amending the 2006 law to indicate that a mosque would be established in a converted building on a Hellenic Navy-donated lot.

On November 6 the government provided a public hall in Thessaloniki for more than 200 Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants to offer Eid al-Adha prayers on November 6, unlike in previous years.

Last year, for the first time, the government provided partial support for the restoration of the oldest mosque in Europe in Didymoticho (Evros).

The government responded immediately to condemn societal anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic actions such as vandalism and arson attacks of the Holocaust monument in Thessaloniki, the synagogue in Corfu, and the historic Hallil Bey mosque in Kavala (northern Greece).

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

The Greek Orthodox Church exercised significant social, political, and economic influence. Some non-Orthodox citizens complained of being treated with suspicion or told by members of society that they were not truly Greek when they revealed their religious affiliations.

Followers of non-Orthodox faiths, particularly missionary faiths, reported incidents of societal discrimination, including warnings by some Orthodox bishops and priests to their parishioners not to visit the leaders or members of religious groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, evangelical Christians, and other Protestants. However, leaders of many non-Orthodox religious groups reported that cordial private contacts between Orthodox Church officials and members of minority religious groups had increased in frequency. Orthodox leaders also attended ceremonies hosted by members of other religious groups.

During the year, unknown assailants launched multiple arson attacks against several informal mosques in downtown Athens. In one such attack in March, five persons were injured. A penal investigation was launched against “unknown perpetrators” who in November 2010 locked an estimated 40 immigrant worshipers into an informal mosque on Athens’ Aghios Panteleimonas square and set it on fire. The worshipers escaped the fire with the help of police, but four persons were injured in ensuing fights between the worshipers and the violent extremists.

In March unknown perpetrators damaged the exterior of the Isalo Mosque (Rodopi prefecture, northern Greece), and in February unknown perpetrators damaged approximately 10 gravestones at the Muslim cemetery in the city of Kommotini in Thrace. In July unknown perpetrators nailed a pig’s head on the wooden door of the historic Hallil Bey mosque in Kavala. While the mosque’s structure is preserved as an architectural monument, it is not used for worship and is not open to the public.

Sporadic expressions of anti-Semitism occurred. In January a senior Greek priest, Metropolitan of Pireaus Seraphim, stated his belief that Jews controlled the banking system and equated Judaism with “Satanism.” In September unknown perpetrators drew anti-Semitic graffiti on a street art composition in Nea Ionia. In June the Holocaust monument in Thessaloniki was desecrated with swastikas. In May unknown perpetrators desecrated a synagogue in Volos, and in April vandals committed an arson attack on a synagogue in Corfu.

In 2007 author Kostas Plevris sued senior representatives of the local Jewish community, journalists, and NGO activists for publicly criticizing the judges who vacated Plevris’ earlier conviction of inciting hatred and racial violence. He also accused them of disseminating false information through the press as well as perjury and aggravated defamation. The NGO activists were found not guilty in a December 6 verdict. The trial of the journalists and Jewish community representatives was scheduled for January and then postponed until December 2012.

A new coalition government formed in November included several members of the Popular Orthodox Rally (LAOS) party, some of whose members have made anti-Semitic remarks in the past.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The ambassador and other U.S. officials discussed religious freedom with senior government officials, including the new secretary general for religions, religious leaders, municipal leaders, members of parliament, and members of other diplomatic missions. Officers from the embassy and the consulate general in Thessaloniki met regularly with representatives of religious groups and investigated reports of societal discrimination. U.S. diplomats regularly traveled to Thrace to discuss religious freedom issues with members of the Muslim minority.

The ambassador met with several religious leaders and discussed religious freedom and interfaith dialogue. He and the consul general in Thessaloniki attended Holocaust memorial events. The U.S. government encouraged the Jewish community in its efforts to engage Aristotle University, the public institution built on the site of the expropriated Jewish cemetery in Thessaloniki, on future projects to memorialize the Jewish heritage of the site.

Embassy officers met regularly with Muslim NGOs and with faith-based charity groups that assist refugees and victims of trafficking in persons. The embassy and consulate general invited representatives from a wide variety of faiths to the annual July Fourth receptions and iftars.

U.S. officials promoted and supported initiatives related to religious freedom and used the International Visitor Leadership Program to introduce Muslim community leaders to the United States and their American counterparts.

U.S. embassy officials successfully supported efforts by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to obtain access to official archives in the country.

The ambassador and other U.S. officials regularly visited religious sites and conducted religious freedom outreach throughout the country.