

MACEDONIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. Members of some religious groups asserted that the government favored the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA). The law requires that religious groups register with the government, but some groups stated that the government implemented the law inconsistently. Restitution of expropriated properties from the Yugoslav era continued to proceed slowly.

There were reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. At times, ethnic tensions restricted religious freedom. The Bektashi community reported harassment and occasional threats from individuals with differing interpretations of Islam.

The ambassador and other embassy officers met regularly with religious groups and government officials to discuss issues such as property restitution, interfaith tolerance, and national religious policy. The embassy organized several events to promote religious tolerance, such as iftar dinners and an interfaith food and blood drive.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to a 2011 estimate by the State Statistical Office, the population is 2.06 million. The 2002 census estimates that 65 percent of the population is Orthodox and 33 percent is Muslim. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, various Protestant denominations, Sufis, and Jews. There is a correlation between ethnicity and religious affiliation; the majority of Orthodox Christians are ethnic Macedonian and most Muslims are ethnic Albanian.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. An antidiscrimination law includes discrimination based on religious beliefs.

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There is no official state religion, but a 2001 constitutional amendment specifically lists five religious groups: the MOC-OA, the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM), the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and the Evangelical Methodist Church. Further changes to the law allow other religious groups to register with the government and obtain the same status as those groups named in the constitution.

The law requires religious groups to register in order to acquire status as legal entities and states that all registered groups are separate from the state and equal before the law. The Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups accepts applications and passes them to Skopje Court II for a decision. The law stipulates application criteria for new registrants and a timeline within which the court must issue its rulings. To register, a religious group must have a physical administrative presence within the country as well as a canon of beliefs and practices distinguishing it as a religious group. Additionally, the name and official insignia of a new group must be different from the names and insignia of previously registered groups, although the law allows multiple groups of a single religion to register. The courts interpret the law to require that the registered leaders of religious groups be citizens.

Foreigners associated with registered religious groups who seek to enter the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites must obtain a work visa before arriving, a process reportedly taking approximately four months. Foreign religious workers are also required to register with the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups.

The law does not permit private religious primary schools, but allows private religious schools at the secondary level and above and religious education in religious venues such as churches and mosques.

The Ministry of Education requires fifth-grade students to select from three elective courses, two of which have religious content: Introduction to Religions, Ethics in Religion, or Classical Culture in European Civilization.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter and Christmas according to the Julian calendar and Ramadan Bajram (end of Ramadan). Other Christian, Islamic, and Jewish holidays are not national holidays, but the government designates them religious holidays for adherents of those faiths.

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Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Members of other religious groups asserted that the government favored the MOC-OA by granting it public properties free of charge, providing funding for the construction of new Orthodox churches, and inviting representatives of the MOC-OA but not of other groups to attend groundbreaking ceremonies and other functions. Moreover, they accused the ruling coalition's dominant ethnic Macedonian party, which is predominantly Orthodox, of politicizing religious issues for its own political gain by appealing to the religious beliefs and identity of the country's majority and by using the MOC-OA as a tool to that end.

Some groups complained of political influence in the religious registration process. The dominant MOC-OA remained the sole registered Orthodox group due to the requirement that religious groups seeking recognition not have names or symbols similar to those of an already registered group. The Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo), an Islamic Sufi order involved in a long-running property dispute with the ICM, continued to be unable to register, which inhibited restitution of the Bektashi compound in Tetovo. The ICM continued to occupy most of the Tetovo compound, limiting Bektashi ability to worship.

During the year, the court approved one new applicant group, Ehli Sunet Vel Xhemat (a Sunni Muslim order previously rejected for registration), bringing the total number of registered religious groups to 30. The Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups stated that it did not have any other pending applications; however, the Bektashi Community of Macedonia's application was still awaiting a ruling from the Supreme Court.

Restitution of religious properties expropriated by the former Yugoslav government remained a pending issue. The government has restituted almost all churches and many mosques to the appropriate religious groups, but several religious groups have not regained full ownership of other properties expropriated by the communist regime. A complicating factor in restitution or compensation claims was that the seized properties often changed hands or were developed since confiscation. The ICM stated it was not able to regain rightful use of several mosques that the government had agreed to return. In addition, the ICM alleged that in some cases the government delayed the process of restitution by selling or starting new construction on disputed property or by disputing the historical legal claim of the ICM to religious properties. The government has not restituted the

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site of the Burmali mosque, demolished in the 1920s, to the ICM. The ICM stated that the government refused to reconstitute this property because the ruling coalition's ethnic Macedonian party and the MOC-OA could not accept the prospect of a new mosque in Skopje's city center. Local and national authorities continued to delay reconstruction of a mosque in Prilep, destroyed during the 2001 conflict, and construction of a mosque in the village of Lazhec. The ICM continued to meet with government officials to seek to resolve property issues.

Several small religious groups complained of bureaucratic obstacles to construction or ownership of houses of worship, making it difficult to construct new churches or to enlarge existing structures. The municipal government continued to block the transfer of ownership of a meeting hall near Kriva Palanka to the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Members of the self-declared Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid, recognized by the Serbian Orthodox Church as the sole legitimate autonomous Orthodox Church in Macedonia, alleged that the government subjected them to media harassment and undue monitoring due to their religious beliefs. In May the Ministry of Justice accused several members of the group, including its leader, Jovan Vraniskovski, of money laundering. The authorities transferred Vraniskovski, a former bishop of the MOC-OA who was defrocked and imprisoned for embezzlement, to a detention facility, where, at year's end, he awaited trial on the new charges. Members of the group claimed conditions at the facility were unacceptable. The Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid did not recognize the MOC-OA's self-declared autocephaly.

In May police detained a large group of Muslims of ethnic Albanian origin in connection with the murder of five ethnic Macedonian Orthodox men in Smiljkovci. Government and police officials immediately depicted the suspects as radical Islamic terrorists, a characterization widely disseminated in the local and international media. By year's end, the authorities had released eleven suspects, sentenced three to prison for illegal arms possession, and continued to detain four. Two remained at large. The trial against the four detainees began in December and continued at year's end. The government did not offer evidence to substantiate its allegations that religion was a factor in the crime. In May thousands of Muslims of various ethnicities rallied against the arrest and the characterization of the suspects as Islamic terrorists.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Because religious identity often correlated with ethnic identity, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being motivated by religious intolerance. Isolated acts of vandalism at cemeteries and religious sites continued, although not with the same frequency as in past years.

In January unknown arsonists unsuccessfully attempted to set fire to two Orthodox churches, one in Struga and the other in Tetovo. The incidents were reportedly in retaliation for street performances at an annual carnival event near Struga where participants allegedly wore garb associated with Muslims and engaged in acts deemed offensive to Islam.

The Bektashi Sufi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo) reported that it continued to receive threats from individuals with differing interpretations of Islam who did not recognize it as a separate group.

In November Limmud, an NGO that facilitates cross-communal discussions of Jewish culture, identity, and education, held a conference for the first time in the country, drawing participants from the small local Jewish community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador met with government officials and the leaders of religious groups to discuss issues such as property restitution, interfaith tolerance, and national religious policy. He and other embassy officers attended events to foster religious freedom, tolerance, and understanding.

The ambassador and other embassy officials hosted several iftars in observance of Ramadan and to promote religious and ethnic tolerance. Government officials and members of various religious groups attended.

On September 10, the embassy hosted its third annual interfaith food and blood drive with the Red Cross of Skopje. Representatives from several religious groups, including the ICM and the MOC-OA, participated along with government officials, members of parliament, and the public. In addition to collecting donations, the goal of the event was to bring together persons from different religious and ethnic groups for a day of community service.