

CYPRUS 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Since 1974 the southern part of Cyprus has been under the control of the government of the Republic of Cyprus, while the northern part, administered by Turkish Cypriots, proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) in 1983. The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any country other than Turkey. A substantial number of Turkish troops remained on the island. A buffer zone, or “green line,” patrolled by the UN Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), separates the two parts.

REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

Executive Summary

The constitution of the Republic of Cyprus (ROC) and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. Turkish Cypriots had relatively easy access to religious sites in the government-controlled area, although some cemeteries and mosques within Greek Cypriot military camps were reportedly inaccessible and neglected. Some prisoners in the Central Prison reported that prison regulations restricted their religious rights.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. In January vandals partially tore down the walls of the mosque in Deneia village which was under restoration. The government, the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus, and political parties publicly condemned the attack and the bicomunal Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage restored the mosque.

U.S. officials met with government leaders, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), international organizations, and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues, including access to religious sites, and encouraged interfaith dialogues and bicomunal reciprocal religious visits across the island.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population of the island to be 1.2 million (July 2013 estimate). According to an October 2011 census by the Government of the Republic of Cyprus, which contains no data on religious affiliation, the population of the government-controlled area is more than 840,000. An earlier

CYPRUS

census in 2001 included data on religious affiliation that showed 95 percent of the permanent population in the government-controlled area belongs to the Autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahais, and Buddhists. The religious affiliation of recent immigrants and migrant workers, predominantly Roman Catholics and Buddhists, is generally different from that of native-born citizens. Most of the approximately 2,300 Jews are foreign-born residents.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

The constitution specifies that the 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 on religious activity and pays taxes only on strictly commercial activities.

The constitution sets guidelines for the Vakif, a Sunni Muslim institution that regulates religious activity for Turkish Cypriots. The Vakif is tax-exempt and 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. The Vakif operates only in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots and does not administer mosques located in the government-controlled area; the ROC government serves as caretaker for the latter. Mosques in government-controlled areas receive financial support from the government.

The constitution recognizes three other religious groups: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Orthodox, and "Latins" (Cypriot Roman Catholics of European or Levantine descent). All are exempt from taxes and eligible for government subsidies for their religious institutions.

Religious groups not among the five recognized in the constitution are not required to register with the government. To engage in financial transactions and maintain bank accounts, however, they must register as nonprofit organizations. In order to register, a religious group must submit through an attorney an application stating its purpose and providing the names of its directors. Religious groups registered as

CYPRUS

nonprofit organizations are tax-exempt and must provide annual reports; they are not eligible for government subsidies.

Foreign missionaries must obtain and periodically renew residence permits to live in the country. It is illegal for a missionary to use “physical or moral compulsion” to bring about religious conversions. Police may investigate missionary activity based on a citizen’s complaint.

The government requires Greek Orthodox religious instruction in public primary and secondary schools. The Ministry of Education (MOE) may excuse primary school students of other religious groups from attending religious services and instruction at the request of their guardians. Secondary school students may be excused by the ministry from religious instruction on grounds of religion or conscience, and they may be excused from attending religious services on any grounds at the request of their guardians, or at their own request if over the age of 16.

Conscientious objectors on religious grounds are exempt from active military duty and from reservist service in the National Guard, but must complete alternative service. There are two options available for conscientious objectors: unarmed military service, which is a maximum of five months longer than the normal 24-month service; or social service, which is a maximum of nine months longer than normal service, but requires fewer hours per day.

Government Practices

Muslim community leaders complained that the government had not granted them full access to and administration of mosques that are located on cultural heritage sites.

Turkish Cypriots had relatively easy access to religious sites in the government-controlled area. Turkish Cypriots stated that the Ministry of Communications and Works’ Department of Antiquities kept Hala Sultan Tekke (Mosque) open only during conventional museum hours, thus limiting access to the mosque to only two of the five daily prayer times. Throughout the year thousands of Turkish Cypriots visited the Hala Sultan Tekke to conduct prayers and services. Friday afternoon prayers have been ongoing since 2008 and Ramadan services on the Night of Kadir (27th night of Ramadan) have been performed since 2009.

CYPRUS

Muslim leaders complained that the restoration of mosques was conducted without consultation with religious authorities and thus violated the sanctity of the space or appropriate use. An example was the restoration of a mosque in Nisou where the garden was landscaped and bones were claimed to have been found and reburied without the presence of an imam. Muslims reported the restoration did not include a washroom; therefore ablutions cannot be performed prior to prayers.

The Ministry of Commerce generally granted religious groups registration as nonprofit organizations.

The international nonprofit organization Conscience and Peace Tax International and the Jehovah's Witnesses argued that the longer duration of alternative service for conscientious objectors compared to military service was punitive. The ombudsman's office did not receive any complaints from conscientious objectors about the procedures the government used to confirm their conscientious objector status and eligibility for alternative military service.

A number of religious groups complained that the government's reluctance to issue visas and residency permits to individuals from countries outside the EU has affected them. The Buddhist community reported difficulties in obtaining visas for clergy. The Jewish community complained about difficulties that student volunteers faced in obtaining government permission for extending their residency, and the Catholic Church said it had difficulties regarding the status of clergy from foreign countries.

Minority religious groups reported that military recruits rarely requested to be excused from taking part in a common prayer led by Church of Cyprus clergy during swearing-in ceremonies because they feared such a request would attract negative attention.

Some prisoners in the Central Prison continued to complain that prison management restricted their religious rights. The ombudsman reported on November 25, that she reiterated to prison authorities her previous recommendations regarding prisoners' religious rights. She did not report any specific complaints in 2013. In April 2012, the ombudsman reported that some members of the Church of Cyprus from Pontus had filed a complaint that the prison management had denied them access to the church on November 21, 2011, an important religious holiday. The ombudsman also reported that prison management did not allow representatives of the Christian Center, an evangelical group located in Nicosia, to visit prisoners who had expressed the wish to meet

CYPRUS

with them. Prison management informed the ombudsman that prison regulations did not allow prisoners to be visited by representatives of a religious group other than the one they had declared upon admission into the prison. The ombudsman concluded that in both cases the prison management had restricted the religious freedom of the prisoners. The ombudsman recommended an amendment of the prison regulations to allow prisoners to meet with representatives of any religious group as desired.

The Jehovah's Witnesses, which had previously reported problems obtaining exemptions for children from religious instruction, stated that the MOE generally granted exemptions and that their children did not experience difficulties in being excused from attending school performances containing religious content. However, the Jehovah's Witnesses reported that some schools did not make arrangements for the students to engage in supervised school work during the time of religious instruction class, as required by regulations. In one case, a school asked a student who had been granted an exemption to stay in class during religious instruction and punished her with an unexcused absence when she refused to do so. The Jehovah's Witnesses submitted an official complaint to the MOE and the government's ombudsman. The ombudsman issued a report in December of 2012, but continued this year to evaluate the MOE's responses to requests for exemptions.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

As ethnicity and religion were often inextricably linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents of discrimination specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance. Those who were not members of the prevailing religious group often faced negative social reactions if they chose to refrain from participating in public ceremonies that were religious in nature. Likewise, Greek Cypriots who converted from Greek Orthodoxy to other faiths sometimes faced social ostracism. However, relations between the Church of Cyprus and other religious communities in the government-controlled area were generally cordial.

On January 19, vandals tore down part of the walls of a mosque in Deneia village. The mosque was one of the monuments being restored by the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage, a bicomunal group composed of Greek

CYPRUS

Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots appointed by the leaders of their communities. The government, the archbishop of the Church of Cyprus and all the political parties condemned the attack and urged the police to arrest the perpetrators. On January 25, three young men confessed to causing the damage, were charged in writing and released pending a court hearing. On April 25, the Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage (TCCH) announced that the mosque had been fully restored.

Representatives of the Jewish community reported that members were verbally harassed on various occasions throughout the year with reported incidents of property damage.

The TCCH identified cultural heritage sites throughout the island in need of emergency preservation measures. These sites included four mosques in the government-controlled area. The committee signed an agreement taking on the responsibility to facilitate the restoration of Apostolos Andreas Monastery in the Karpas peninsula in the north. On September 17, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) signed separate agreements with the Church of Cyprus and with Evkaf (a Vakif foundation) to implement the restoration project.

In September the Archbishop of the Church of Cyprus met with the grand mufti who represents the Muslim community in the north. In October political leaders in both Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities took steps to allow the reciprocal visits of Muslim and Greek Orthodox religious leaders to places of worship across the “Green Line” dividing Cyprus. The grand mufti, accompanied by the archbishop, visited Hala Sultan Tekke in the south for the first time. Religious figures have continued a dialogue and visits on both sides of the buffer zone.

Throughout the year thousands of Turkish Cypriots visited the Hala Sultan Tekke to conduct prayers and services.

The Church of Cyprus donated a church to the Orthodox Romanian community in Cyprus and appointed a priest to serve the community. The Bishop of Tamassos and a representative from the Romanian Patriarchate inaugurated the church on October 6.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officials met frequently with government leaders, NGOs, international organizations, and leaders from a variety of religious groups to discuss religious

CYPRUS

freedom issues, including access to religious sites on either side of the “green line.” Embassy staff observed religious ceremonies of minority religious groups at places of worship where special permissions may be required, such as at Hala Sultan Tekke, St. Mamas, Chrysostiros Church, and at Maronite services. Embassy staff regularly visited sites of religious significance and met with representatives of minority religious groups to listen to their concerns, specifically of the Maronite Catholic and Armenian Orthodox communities. Embassy staff engaged UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief during his visit to Cyprus in September and when he participated in an inter-religious roundtable. Embassy officials encouraged the reciprocal visits between Greek Orthodox and Muslim leaders to places of worship on either side of the “green line” dividing Cyprus.

THE AREA ADMINISTERED BY TURKISH CYPRIOTS

Executive Summary

Since 1974 the northern part of Cyprus has been run by a Turkish Cypriot administration that proclaimed itself the “Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” (“TRNC”) in 1983. The United States does not recognize the “TRNC,” nor does any country other than Turkey. “Laws” in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area generally protect religious freedom; however, some policies restrict religious freedom in practice. Some religious groups, including Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, and Maronite Catholics, had limited access to their places of worship in the north. Some groups complained that some religious sites were damaged, close to collapse, or had been converted to other uses. Some religious groups reported that the authorities monitored their activities.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Greek Cypriots continued to report that vandals damaged and removed religious icons from vacant Greek Orthodox churches located in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area.

Embassy representatives met with Turkish Cypriot representatives, NGOs, international organizations, and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues, including access to religious sites and the ability to hold religious services freely. Embassy staff observed religious ceremonies and visited sites of religious significance.

Section I. Religious Demography

CYPRUS

According to the 2011 census by the Turkish Cypriot administration, which contains no data on religious affiliation, the population of the area administered by Turkish Cypriots is 295,000. Sociologists estimate 98 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. An estimated 10,000 immigrant workers and 8,000 settlers from Turkey of Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab origin are Alevi, and there are also small numbers of followers of other schools of Islam. Other small groups include approximately: 330 members of the autocephalous Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus, 200 members of the Russian Orthodox Church, 150 Bahais, 120 Maronite Catholics, 180 Anglicans, 150 mostly expatriate Jews, and 40 Jehovah's Witnesses. There are smaller numbers of Roman Catholics and members of several Protestant denominations, including Pentecostals, Baptists, and Methodists.

Section II. Status of "Government" Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

"Laws" in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots generally protect religious freedom; however, some policies restrict religious freedom, particularly for members of the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox churches.

The "law" refers specifically to a "secular republic." The "law" does not recognize any specific religion. It states, however, that the Sunni Muslim 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 has preferential tax status; it 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 group in the area is tax-exempt.

The 1975 Vienna III Agreement covers the treatment of Greek Cypriots and Maronite Catholics 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 for Greek Cypriots, 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."

CYPRUS

Turkish Cypriot “regulations” stipulate that Greek Orthodox residents may hold liturgies or Masses conducted by two designated priests at four designated functional churches in the Karpas peninsula without seeking permission. Other religious groups must submit applications for permission to the authorities to hold religious services at churches or monasteries. Permission from the authorities is also necessary for priests other than those officially designated to conduct services. Specific permission is also required for services that include participation by Cypriots who are not residents in the Turkish Cypriot-administered area, such as members of the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox churches living in the government-controlled area. Applications to hold worship services at these sites are required ten days before the date of such religious services and coordinated through the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP).

The “Presidency of the Religious Affairs of Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus” represents Islam in the area administered by the Turkish Cypriots. Under this organization’s direction, resident imams may conduct prayers and sermons in mosques.

Religious groups are not required to register with authorities as associations, but only registered associations may engage in commercial activity and maintain bank accounts. Associations do not receive tax-exempt status or any “government” benefits or subsidies. Religious groups are not permitted to register as associations if the stated purpose of the association is to conduct religious services.

There is compulsory instruction covering religion, culture, and ethics in grades four through eight in all schools. This instruction focuses primarily on Islam, but also includes sessions on comparative religion. The instruction is mandatory and attendance is required of all students, regardless of their faith. Non-Muslim students may be excused from attending religious instruction at the request of their guardians. At the high-school level, such instruction is optional.

There are no provisions or “laws” allowing Turkish Cypriots to engage in conscientious objection to military service, which includes a one-day annual reserve duty requirement.

“Government” Practices

CYPRUS

The Turkish Cypriot administration restricted access to Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Armenian Orthodox places of worship and placed other restrictions on minority religious groups.

Greek Orthodox and Maronite Catholics could not freely visit most religious sites located in military zones in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. Access to the Church of Ayia Marina/Gurpinar, however, was approved for one visit per year and in July the Maronite community visited the church for the first time since 1974. Restoration of the Maronite church in Asomatos/Ozgun was completed in 2012.

The administration denied permission to use certain Christian religious sites, including the Church of Saint Marina in Kythrea, because the church was being used as a cultural center and library. The administration also denied a request to hold a service at the Church of Saint Georgios because the church was being used as a youth center. The administration denied a request to use the church on Panagia Chrysopolitissa without a stated reason, and denied a request to restore tombstones and crosses of the graves at the cemeteries of Pano and Kato Dikomo, also for no stated reason.

The “Presidency of the Religious Affairs of the TRNC” staffed 190-200 mosques with 360 imams. Members of the majority Sunni religious community voiced concerns about such actions interfering with religious affairs.

Reports indicated that Turkish Cypriot authorities did not allocate additional funds beyond 546,430 Turkish lira (\$346,000) in 2006 to complete the restoration of 15 Greek Orthodox churches in the north. In addition, authorities stated that some Greek Orthodox and Maronite churches had long been converted to other uses. One religious group complained that religious items were being held in museums against the wishes of the community. The Cultural Heritage Technical Committee members cleaned and carried out minor repairs in ten churches and mosques in both communities by using their combined resources.

As part of the reciprocal religious visit arrangement, in October Turkish Cypriots lifted the travel ban against the Bishop of the Karpas and he entered the north to visit the Apostolos Andreas monastery with the Turkish Cypriot Imam. He returned to perform the liturgy at Apostolos Andreas in November, a ceremony attended by thousands. Religious leaders continued to meet and arrange visits across the “green line.”

CYPRUS

Some religious groups reported that Turkish Cypriot authorities, including the police, monitored their activities. A resident Greek Orthodox priest reported heavy police presence during church services and stated that the police questioned him frequently about his activities. Turkish Cypriot representatives stated that the purpose of the police presence was to provide security and protect religious icons and artifacts; however, religious groups perceived the monitoring as intimidation and harassment.

Turkish Cypriots eased restrictions on holding regular religious services in certain churches, although they did not approve all requests. UNFICYP reported that of the 61 requests made to date, eight were refused on various grounds. One denied request came from Greek Orthodox non-resident worshipers who sought permission to conduct religious service at the Church of Panayia Perghamiotissa in the village of Akanthu on November 17.

The four churches in the primarily Maronite village of Kormakitis and the Maronite church in Karpashia functioned regularly and did not need special permission for any services. Three smaller Maronite churches continued to require special permission to hold services, and one church in Kambyli required a special permit at all times.

In August, the press reported that approximately 250 Maronites held a mass at Panagia Kambyli Church to celebrate Assumption Day at Kambyli/Hisarkoy.

Some non-Sunni Muslims lacked places of worship and funding to construct such facilities. Alevis, which like all non-Sunni Muslim religious groups were recognized by the authorities as an association and not as a religious group, reported that due to the lack of a *cem evi* (house of worship), they were required to conduct funerals inside mosques, contrary to their traditions. Alevi representatives stated that they felt no pressure and could freely practice their faith; however, they perceived favoritism in “state” funding toward the majority Sunni Muslim population through financing mosque construction and administration of mosques. In April 2012, the Pir Sultan Abdal Association, an Alevi NGO, visited Turkish Cypriot political parties to request support to build a *cem evi* and to advocate the inclusion of Alevism in the education curriculum. While several of the parties expressed support for the inclusion of Alevism in the education curriculum, there were no reports of further action.

Some minority religious groups complained that their children were still required to complete and pass the religious course which is focused on Islam and is

CYPRUS

mandatory in public schools. In September, the Hala Sultan Religious High School in Haspolot held a high-profile opening ceremony that was attended by senior Turkish Cypriot representatives and visiting Turkish political figures. At the same time, a groundbreaking ceremony was held for the construction of a large mosque within the same complex. The press reported that the curriculum included the Quran, career Arabic, basic religious knowledge, history of Islam, Islamic law, the prophet's life, interpreting the Quran, and oration. Secular members of the Turkish Cypriot community, unions, and NGOs criticized the opening of the school, saying that Turkey was trying to "Islamize" secular Turkish Cypriots.

In July the secular Turkish Cypriot Teacher Trade Union criticized the then interim "government" for allowing the continuation of Quran courses, despite its policy to abolish such courses.

The "Constitutional Court" held a hearing in October on Turkish Cypriot Murat Kanatli's declaration of conscientious objection to the one-day annual reserve duty requirement. The "court" rejected Kanatli's conscientious objection, stating that reserve duty and military duty were not against the "constitution" and that these were a citizen's duty. The "Constitutional Court" sent the decision to the "Military Court."

The rebuilding of the 200-year-old Greek Orthodox Chapel of Saint Thekla, that had been demolished in 2011, was completed.

"Government" Inaction

The authorities continued to deny the application of a Turkish-speaking Protestant congregation for legal recognition as a religious association with the purpose of conducting religious services, as they had done for the past ten years. The congregation filed a "court" case in 2012 because the group's inability to register as an association prevented it from establishing a trust fund and purchasing property. The congregation used rented space in Kyrenia and Nicosia for religious services.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

CYPRUS

Some religious groups complained that some religious sites to which they had little or no access were damaged or close to collapse and remained unpreserved.

Greek Cypriots continued to report that vandals damaged vacant Greek Orthodox churches in the area administered by Turkish Cypriots. According to Turkish Cypriot authorities, police closely investigated all such complaints of vandalism and in some cases have proposed renovations or cleanup of sites.

Turkish Cypriot religious groups reported that Muslim parents seeking to send their children to religious summer courses faced strong public criticism, particularly from local teachers.

Some religious groups reported that Turkish Cypriot converts from Islam to other religions, particularly Christianity, faced social ostracism and political criticism.

The Technical Committee on Cultural Heritage, a group composed of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots appointed by the leaders of their communities, identified cultural heritage sites throughout the island in need of emergency preservation. These sites, five in each community, included five churches located in the area administered by the Turkish Cypriots. The committee also assumed a coordination and facilitator role for the restoration of the Apostolos Andreas Monastery in the Karpas peninsula. In September the, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) signed contribution agreements with the Church of Cyprus and the Evkaf Foundation for restoration of the Apostolos Andreas Monastery. In addition, the committee organized small-scale grassroots initiatives to help maintain cultural heritage sites, including religious sites, in poor condition on both sides of the island.

A local newspaper removed a paid advertisement by a Turkish-speaking Protestant representative offering free Bibles. The paper refunded the ad costs and reportedly said it had to pull the advertisement because of “government” pressure.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy representatives met with Turkish Cypriot representatives, NGOs, international organizations, and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom, including access to religious sites and the ability to hold religious services at the sites without restrictions. Embassy staff observed religious ceremonies at Saint Mamas in Morphou and Apostolos Andreas, historically important churches that attracted large numbers of worshippers from the government-controlled area, and

CYPRUS

visited the Maronite enclave in Kormakitis. Embassy staff worked to ensure that the Armenian Orthodox community is allowed to contribute its views regarding the use of the newly restored Armenian Church and Monastery complex in northern Nicosia.