

ALBANIA 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and religion. It stipulates there is no official religion, says the state is neutral in matters of belief, recognizes the equality and independence of religious groups, and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The government has agreements with the Sunni Muslim and Bektashi communities, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania (VUSH), a Protestant umbrella organization, pertaining to recognition, property restitution, and other arrangements. The law stipulates the government will give financial support to faith communities, but the government's agreement with the VUSH under the law does not specifically designate it to receive such funding. The government legalized 41 mosques during the year, compared with 137 in the previous year, six in 2015, and reportedly none in 2014. Religious groups reported the Agency for the Treatment of Property (ATP) did not process any claims for restitution of property seized during the communist era and approved only one claim for compensation. The ATP stated hundreds of claims awaited amendment of the property law provisions before they could be resolved. VUSH leaders continued to report difficulties in acquiring land to construct places of worship and problems concerning tax payments. President Ilir Meta granted citizenship to Archbishop Anastasios of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church, stating that he "had reinvigorated the Church after communism." Between January and May, the government trained 29 teachers at 15 schools as part of a pilot educational program to help prevent radicalization and promote religious tolerance; however, implementation of the full program stalled in May and its future appeared uncertain. The parliament passed a law on the rights and freedoms of national minorities.

The Interreligious Council, a forum for the country's religious leaders to discuss shared concerns, met three times during the year in contrast to the previous year when it did not meet at all. The Albanian Islamic Community (AIC) was subjected to criticism on social media for a perceived insult to the country's medieval hero Skanderbeg at its Eid al-Adha celebration.

U.S. embassy officers continued to urge government officials to accelerate the religious property claims process and return to religious groups the buildings and other property confiscated from them during the communist era. Embassy youth education programs continued to focus on religious diversity. Other embassy sponsored programs focused on promoting women's empowerment in religious

communities and the compatibility of religious faith and democracy. The embassy also continued its work with religious communities to discourage the appeal among youth of violent extremism related to religion. The embassy sponsored the participation of two individuals, including a diversity specialist in the state police, in an exchange program designed to raise awareness and acceptance of human and civil rights for groups including religious minority communities. The embassy also sponsored the rector of Beder University for an exchange visit to the United States with a focus on religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the most recent census conducted in 2011, Sunni Muslims constitute nearly 57 percent of the population, Roman Catholics 10 percent, members of the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania nearly 7 percent, and members of the Bektashi Order (a form of Shia Sufism) 2 percent. Other groups include Protestant denominations, Bahais, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and a small Jewish community. Nearly 20 percent of respondents declined to answer the optional question about religious affiliation, creating the potential for an undercount. No other official estimate is expected until the next census in 2021.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates there is no official religion, all religions are equal, and the state has the duty to respect and protect religious coexistence. It declares the state is neutral in questions of belief and recognizes the independence of religious groups. According to the constitution, relations between the state and religious groups are regulated by agreements between these groups and the Council of Ministers and ratified by the parliament.

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and guarantees freedom of conscience, religion, and free expression. It states everyone is free to choose or change their religion or beliefs and to express them individually, collectively, in public, or in private. The constitution also states individuals may not be compelled to participate or excluded from participating in a religious community or its practices, nor may they be compelled to make their beliefs or faith public or be prohibited from doing so. It prohibits political parties or other organizations whose

programs incite or support religious hatred. The criminal code prohibits interference in an individual's ability to practice a religion and prescribes punishments of up to three years in prison for obstructing the activities of religious organizations or for willfully destroying objects or buildings of religious value.

By law, the Office of the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination receives and processes discrimination complaints, including those concerning religious practice. The law specifies the State Committee on Cults, under the jurisdiction of the Office of the Prime Minister, regulates relations between the government and religious groups, protects freedom of religion, and promotes interfaith cooperation and understanding. The law also directs the committee to maintain records and statistics on foreign religious groups that solicit assistance and to support foreign employees of religious groups in obtaining residence permits.

The government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups, but a religious group must register with the district court as a nonprofit association to qualify for certain benefits, including opening a bank account, owning property, and obtaining some degree of tax-exempt status. The registration process entails submission of information on the form and scope of the organization, its activities, the identities of its founders and legal representatives, the nature of its interactions with other stakeholders (e.g., government ministries and civil society organizations) in a particular field, the address of the organization, and payment of a 1,000 lek (\$9) fee to the district court. A judge is randomly assigned within three to four days of the submission of an application, and the process usually concludes within one session.

The government has agreements with the Sunni Muslim and Bektashi communities, the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, and the VUSH. The bilateral agreements serve to codify arrangements pertaining to official recognition, property restitution, tax exemptions on income, donations and religious property, and exemption from submitting accounting records for religious activities. A provision of law enacted in 2009 specifies the government will provide financial support to the four religious communities with which it has agreements dating from the same time. This provision of the law does not include the VUSH, whose agreement with the government dates from 2011. There is no provision of the law stipulating the VUSH should receive financial support from the government.

The law requires the ATP to address claims by religious groups for properties confiscated during the communist era.

The law allows religious communities to run educational institutions as well as build and manage religious cemeteries on land the communities own.

Public schools are secular, and the law prohibits religious instruction in them. Private schools may offer religious instruction. According to official 2016 figures, religious groups, organizations, and foundations have 125 affiliated associations and foundations managing 116 educational institutions, including universities, primary and secondary schools, preschools, kindergartens, vocational schools, and orphanages. By law, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport must license these institutions, and nonreligious curricula must comply with national education standards. Catholic, Muslim, and Orthodox groups operate numerous state-licensed kindergartens, schools, and universities. Most of these do not have mandatory religion classes but offer them as an elective. The Muslim community runs six madrassahs that teach religion in addition to the state-sponsored curriculum.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The Catholic, Sunni Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities reported the total government financial support for these four groups remained at 109 million lek (\$986,000), the same as in 2016. The Muslim community continued to receive 28 percent, while the remaining three each continued to receive 24 percent. The communities continued to use the funds to cover part of the salaries for administrative and educational staff. The Bektashi community, which had fewer staff members than the others, continued to use part of the funds it received for new places of worship.

The government issued a decision in April to reduce the price of electricity as a type of indirect financial support for religious communities. The VUSH reported that several of its properties continued to be charged at the higher rates set for businesses.

The VUSH also reported a continued lack of financial support from the government, despite repeated requests for the government to amend the law and add the provision of financial support.

The government continued the process of legalizing unofficial mosques built during the 1990s, and issued 41 property certificates during the year, compared with 137 in the previous year, six in 2015, and reportedly none in 2014. The government continued to require the endorsement of the AIC for legalization.

The government did not return any properties confiscated under the communist regime during the year; it approved compensation for one property, which had belonged to the Bektashi community. The government stated it was prepared to provide compensation for 112 additional properties, but the relevant religious communities had not yet gone through the required step of requesting the funds. The resolution of the single claim during the year still left unresolved hundreds of claims submitted by the religious communities to the ATP since the fall of the communist regime in 1990. The ATP acknowledged the restitution process was slow but stated 423 claims by religious communities had been resolved recently. These were pending amendment of the 2015 property law, part of which had been declared unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court. The ATP also stated it continued to budget funds for the settlement of older claims decided in previous years but not yet implemented, pending a change in the property law provisions.

On a visit in May, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Ahmed Shaheed, while offering general praise for the government's efforts to protect religious freedoms, urged the government to return to religious communities their properties nationalized under the previous communist regime.

Bektashi leaders reported construction continued on places of worship in Gjirokaster, Diber, Permet, and Elbasan. The government reportedly legalized nine *tekkas* (places of worship) in Gjirokaster, Permet, and Elbasan during the year. The Bektashi said they continued to have problems with the local registration offices in Tirana, Elbasan, and Gjirokaster, noting that the registration process was slow, bureaucratic, and occasionally vulnerable to corruption.

VUSH members continued to report difficulties in acquiring land on which to construct places of worship, due to local government tax assessments and regulations. They said they therefore continued to rent existing buildings.

VUSH leaders reported continued problems with regard to property taxes on their churches. They reported authorities levied fines on them for not submitting tax documents normally required only from for-profit companies. In May the VUSH met with tax authorities who reportedly gave assurances such fines would cease, but the VUSH reported the fines continued to be assessed.

On December 22, President Ilir Meta signed a decree to give citizenship to Archbishop Anastasios of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church, which he issued on December 24. The president said Anastasios fulfilled the requirements for citizenship, reinvigorated the Church after communism, and made it one of the most honored churches in the world. While the Greek president and foreign minister welcomed the action, there was some societal condemnation and mixed local political reaction.

The Institute for Education Development trained 29 civics education and sociology teachers in 15 pilot schools between January and May, pursuant to the 2016 announcement by Prime Minister Edi Rama of a new program of religious education in schools, designed to help prevent radicalization and promote religious tolerance. Both the prime minister and the minister of education continued to assert the program would not affect the secular nature of the country's education system. Religious groups did not contradict this assertion. A pilot cross-thematic curriculum was developed for sixth and 10th grade students; however, implementation of the full program stalled in May, and its future appeared uncertain.

In October the parliament passed a new law on minorities that would provide additional protection for minority rights, including the freedom of religion.

Representatives of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities continued to state the 2011 census presented an inaccurate picture of the religious demographics of the country because their numbers were undercounted. Bektashi leaders expressed concern the census had classified many of their followers as Muslim but not Bektashi.

In May UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Ahmed Shaheed completed his assessment of the state of religious freedom in the country and stated, "Albania is a model for interfaith harmony." He called on the country "not to take for granted," but to "uphold the unique societal harmony and co-existence." He mentioned concern about "unknown foreign funding" but noted, "radical religious groups were under control." He also urged the government to return properties that were nationalized under the previous communist regime.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Interreligious Council, established as a forum for leaders of the Catholic, Sunni Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities to discuss shared concerns, met three times during the year, in contrast with 2016, when it did not meet. In the absence of a permanent secretary general, the four communities making up the council elected the Orthodox Church as the first six-month chair of a rotating chairmanship.

The country's general election was held on June 25, the same day as the Eid al-Fitr holiday. The AIC issued a statement indicating that even though the date was not ideal, peaceful elections were important for the country and all Muslims should exercise their democratic right to vote.

The AIC received criticism on social media for a perceived insult to the country's medieval hero Skanderbeg. The AIC had set up two large screens on the grounds where its public September 1 Eid al-Adha celebration took place in order to accommodate the large crowd, according to the Tirana mufti. From certain viewing angles, however, the screens partially obstructed the view of a statue of Skanderbeg, although observers from most other angles reported this was not the case. Social media sites were nonetheless full of posts criticizing the Muslim community's perceived insult to the nation.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In meetings with the state commissioner on cults and the ATP, embassy officers continued to urge the government to accelerate its handling of religious property claims and to restore to religious groups their property confiscated during the communist era. In June the embassy sponsored the participation of two individuals, including a diversity specialist in the state police, in an exchange program designed to raise awareness and acceptance of human and civil rights for groups, including religious minority communities. The embassy also sponsored the rector of Beder University to attend a Study of the United States Institutes visit to the United States, with a focus on religious tolerance.

The Ambassador and other embassy officers continued to promote religious tolerance in meetings with the Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant communities, and in visits to churches, mosques, and other religious sites. The Ambassador hosted an iftar for Muslim youth from different communities where he stressed the value of religious dialogue and tolerance.

The embassy continued its youth education programs and its work with religious communities to decrease the potential appeal of violent religious extremism. As part of these programs, students at Islamic, Catholic, and Orthodox religious schools planned and carried out projects celebrating religious diversity and tolerance. Other embassy-sponsored programs focused on promoting women's empowerment in the religious communities in Elbasan and celebrating religious diversity through sports clinics with students from madrassahs and Catholic and Muslim universities. Additional seminars sponsored by the embassy with key religious figures and leaders in government and academia focused on the compatibility of religious faith and democracy.