

# **ALBANIA 2013 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 government made little progress in addressing claims from religious groups for the return or restitution of property seized during the former communist era, and many of the property claims remained unresolved.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. embassy officials met regularly with government and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues raised by citizens, the media, and religious groups, including the importance of restoring religious property confiscated during the communist era. The embassy hosted events to promote religious freedom, such as an annual iftar and visits to madrassas and other educational institutions. U.S. officials visited churches, mosques, and religious sites throughout the year.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3 million (July 2013 estimate). It is difficult to assess the size of religious groups because nearly 20 percent of respondents declined to answer the optional question about religious affiliation in the most recent census in 2011. According to the census, Sunni Muslims constitute nearly 57 percent of the population, Roman Catholics 10 percent, Orthodox Christians (the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania) nearly 7 percent, and Bektashi (a form of Shia Sufism) 2 percent. The Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches and Bektashi representatives all maintain that their numbers are underrepresented in the official census. Other groups present include Bahais, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The State Committee on Cults reports more than 220 religious groups, organizations, foundations, and educational institutions operating in the country.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

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

By law, the country is secular. According to the constitution, there is no official religion, and all religions are equal.

The Office of the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination receives and processes discrimination complaints, including those concerning religious practice. The State Committee on Cults, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, regulates relations between the government and religious groups, protects freedom of religion, and promotes interfaith cooperation and understanding. The committee maintains records and statistics on foreign religious groups that solicit its assistance. It also assists foreign employees of religious groups in obtaining residence permits.

The government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups. Any group may acquire official status by registering with the Tirana District Court as a nonprofit association, regardless of whether the group has a cultural, recreational, religious, or humanitarian character. Registration grants religious groups the right to hold bank accounts, to own property, and to receive some degree of tax-exempt status.

The constitution calls for separate bilateral agreements to regulate relations between the government and religious groups. The government has such agreements with the Roman Catholic Church; the Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities; and the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania, a Protestant umbrella organization. Among other advantages, the agreements confer official recognition, prioritized property restitution, and tax exemptions.

According to the Ministry of Education, public schools are secular and the law prohibits religious instruction. Religion is not taught in public schools. According to official figures, religious groups, organizations, and foundations have 125 affiliated associations and foundations managing 96 educational institutions. By law, the Ministry of Education must license these schools, and curricula must comply with national education standards. Catholic and Muslim groups operate numerous state-licensed schools. The Orthodox Church operates religious schools and a university.

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### Government Practices

The government continued to address both pre-existing and new claims from religious groups regarding the return or restitution of property seized during the former communist era; however, many property claims remained unresolved. The State Agency for the Restitution and Compensation of Property is required by law to give priority to properties owned by religious groups, but religious groups reported that progress was slow. In some cases, the government provided land grants in lieu of property restitution. Administrative and legal challenges related to ownership claims in general made property restitution difficult for individuals and organizations, including religious groups. For example, during the year the government completed the return of four buildings in Durres and Korca to the Orthodox Church through the restitution process, but approximately 435 claims remained unresolved.

In August private bailiffs hired by the city of Permet forcibly removed several Orthodox clergy members and religious artifacts from a disputed property. The Orthodox Church had been using a church on the property as a place of worship from the 17th century until 1962 when the communist regime converted the building into a cultural center. In 1998, the Church claimed it under the country's restitution laws. The courts initially ruled in the Church's favor but later overturned the decision and granted the property to the municipality in 2002. Leaders from the country's three Christian communities with which the government has bilateral agreements (the Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Protestant Evangelical Alliance) issued a joint statement condemning the use of force in executing the decade-old court order and called for the return of the property to the Church. Members of the Orthodox Church later overran guards to retake the property, which was subsequently resecured by the city and boarded up. The Orthodox Church continued to hold religious services outside of the property's gate in protest. Negotiations to resolve the case continued through the end of the year.

Property ownership disputes and problems tracking or registering land ownership made it difficult for religious groups to acquire new land on which to build places of worship. For example, the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania rented existing buildings, but reported that difficulties acquiring land and constructing their own buildings impeded their ability to hold religious services.

The Albanian Islamic Community (AIC) continued to try to secure building permits from the government for a new mosque on land in Tirana that was being

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returned to the community through the restitution process. The revocation of a license to construct a commercial building on land adjacent to where the mosque would be built raised questions about the mosque's construction as well.

Although there is no legal prohibition against wearing religious clothing or symbols, school principals maintained the right to set standards for "appropriate clothing," which in some instances included restrictions on public displays of religious symbols.

Several religious leaders continued to challenge the results of the 2011 census, alleging that census officials never visited a large number of their followers. Additionally, confusion regarding the consequences of ethnic and religious self-identification may have led many respondents not to identify their religious affiliation. For example, ethnic Greek minority groups had encouraged their members to boycott the census, affecting measurements of the Greek ethnic minority and the Greek Orthodox Church.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, although ethnicity and religion were often closely linked, particularly within the Greek minority, making it difficult to categorize some incidents as either ethnically or religiously motivated.

In February Archbishop Anastasios of the Albanian Orthodox Church responded to statements made against him by nationalist party leader Kreshnik Spahiu and Father Nikolla Marku, a Macedonian Orthodox Priest in Albania, who called for Archbishop Anastasio's removal as head of the church due to his Greek ethnicity. He stated that the statements against him and the church threatened to undermine the country's tradition of religious harmony.

Societal respect for religious freedom was generally high. Through the Interreligious Council of Albania, leaders of the Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, and Bektashi communities discussed common concerns and issued joint public statements on a variety of issues. Religious leaders frequently attended other religious communities' celebrations as a sign of respect.

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### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials continued to urge the government to address religious property claims and return to religious groups the buildings, land, and other property confiscated during the communist era. The Ambassador and other embassy officials frequently engaged religious leaders and community members in events such as the annual embassy-hosted interfaith iftar, where the Ambassador emphasized the value of Albania's culture of religious tolerance. U.S. officials visited churches, mosques, and religious sites throughout the year.

Through a civic education program, the embassy also organized numerous activities throughout the country to promote religious freedom and tolerance, including visits to Islamic and Orthodox religious schools, public high schools, and other educational institutions. Through this program, the embassy engaged over 7,000 students in discussing how civic values such as environmental stewardship and preventing domestic violence and violence against women are common to many religious groups. Students and teachers worked with members of other religious groups and schools in the community to perform joint service projects and present research on themes of common value across religions.

In July the embassy organized and funded the travel of Baba Edmond Brahimaj ("Baba Mond") to participate in the Secretary of State's iftar dinner in Washington, D.C. Baba Mond heads the global Bektashi order of Islamic Sufiism, headquartered in Albania, and is a strong advocate of religious tolerance.