

MACEDONIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, guarantee registered religious organizations equality before the law, and protect citizens from religious discrimination. Religious groups reported government favoritism toward the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA), the politicization of religion, and discrimination against minority religious groups. Violent protests by ethnic Albanians followed a guilty verdict in the trial of six ethnic Albanian Muslims on terrorism charges for the 2012 murder of five ethnic Macedonian Orthodox Christians. Minority religious groups continued to report they had trouble registering with the government and obtaining restitution of former properties and permits for new construction.

Protests occasionally arose over the construction of religious structures which were often used to mark ethnic and political territory. The Bektashi Sufi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo) reported threats and harassment from individuals with different interpretations of Islam. Acts of vandalism at cemeteries and religious sites continued throughout the year.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officers met with government officials to discuss issues such as property restitution, interfaith tolerance, and the separation of church and state. The embassy contributed funding to a dialogue on interfaith understanding and Holocaust education programs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.1 million (July 2014 estimate). The last national census in 2002 estimated 65 percent of the population was Orthodox Christian and 33 percent Muslim. Other religious groups, which together constitute less than five percent of the population, include Catholics, various Protestant denominations, and Jews. There is a correlation between ethnicity and religious affiliation; the majority of Orthodox Christians are ethnic Macedonian, and most ethnic Albanians are Muslim.

Most Muslims live in the northern and western parts of the country, while the majority of Orthodox Christians live in the central and southeastern regions. There is also a correlation between religious and political affiliation; political parties are largely divided along ethnic lines, and ethnicity is closely tied to religious

MACEDONIA

affiliation. There is not a significant correlation between religious affiliation and socio-economic status.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution guarantees the freedom of religion and states all registered religious organizations are separate from the state and equal before the law. The constitution also grants the Macedonian Orthodox Church and other religious groups the right to establish schools, charities, and other social institutions. An antidiscrimination law includes protection from discrimination based on religious beliefs. There is no official state religion.

The constitution specifically recognizes five religious communities: the MOC-OA, the Islamic Religious Community in Macedonia (ICM), the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Methodist Church, and the Jewish community. The law allows other religious organizations to apply for government recognition. The government has granted this recognition to 30 religious organizations. In order to obtain the same legal rights and status as the five groups named in the constitution, the law requires aspirant religious communities to register with the courts. Once registered, a religious community or group is eligible to apply for property restitution, government-funded projects, and construction permits for cultural preservation of shrines and cultural sites. It may also establish schools. Failure to register does not prevent a religious group from practicing or result in legal punishment or fines, but may prevent the group from engaging in certain ancillary actions, such as inviting religious leaders from abroad and receiving donations.

Religious organizations can apply to register themselves as a “church,” a “religious community,” or a “religious group.” These classifications are based on group size, internal organization, and internal hierarchy, and do not bestow different legal rights, benefits, or obligations. According to judicial authorities, these three categories are treated equally before the law. Skopje Basic Court II accepts registration applications and has 15 business days to determine whether a religious organization’s application meets the legal registration criteria. These criteria are: a physical administrative presence within the country, an explanation of the beliefs and practices distinguishing it from other religious organizations, a unique name and official insignia, a breakdown of the organization’s financial assets and funding sources, identification of a supervisory body to manage the organization’s

MACEDONIA

finances, and minutes from the organization's founding meeting. The law allows multiple groups of a single faith to register. The courts interpret the law to require the registered leaders of religious groups to be citizens of Macedonia.

The court sends approved applications to the Commission for Relations with Religious Communities and Groups (CRRCG), which adds the organization to its registry. If the application is denied, the organization can appeal the decision to the State Appellate Court. If the State Appellate Court denies the application, the only recourse for the organization is to file a human rights petition with the Constitutional Court on grounds of denial of religious rights. If the Constitutional Court denies the petition, the organization can appeal the case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

The law does not permit private religious primary schools, but allows private religious schools at the secondary level and above. The Ministry of Education requires fifth-grade students to take one of three elective courses, two of which have religious content: Introduction to Religions, Ethics in Religion, or Classical Culture in European Civilization.

All foreigners who seek to enter the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites, whether affiliated with a registered religious organization or not, must obtain a work visa before arriving, a process reportedly taking approximately four months. Foreign religious workers are then required to register with the CRRCG. Work visas are valid for six months, with the option to renew for an additional six months. Subsequent visa renewals are valid for one year.

Government Practices

Religious differences continued to play a role in criminal and civil court cases. The government continued to deny recognition to minority religious groups and maintained its preferential treatment of the MOC-OA. Minority religious groups continued to have trouble obtaining restitution of former properties and permits for new construction.

In June a court sentenced six ethnic Albanian Muslims for the April 2012 murder of five ethnic Macedonians of the Orthodox faith near the village of Smiljkovci. The court gave six of the defendants life sentences on terrorism charges and acquitted the seventh. The court, in determining that the criminal offense was targeted at ethnic Macedonians, said it was planned to occur on Orthodox Easter

MACEDONIA

and was intended to cause religious strife. Much of the key evidence was sealed and critics stated the charges were not substantiated. Ethnic Albanians in Skopje and other cities violently protested the verdict. They stated the judicial process was not transparent and the court had failed to provide sufficient evidence for the convictions.

The head of the self-declared Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid, Jovan Vraniskovski, remained in prison for money laundering after a previous conviction for embezzlement. The Appellate Court in Skopje confirmed his three-year sentence for money laundering on July 17. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights declared Vraniskovski a political prisoner, and members of his church stated his conviction was due to his religious beliefs. Representatives of the MOC-OA continued to say the difficulties facing Vraniskovski and his followers were strictly legal in nature and not related to religious freedom or the influence of the MOC-OA. In December a high-level visitor from the Russian Orthodox Church met with the prime minister, president, and high-level MOC-OA officials and urged them to release Vraniskovski in order to help settle the MOC-OA's status within the international Orthodox community. The MOC-OA officially asked for clemency for Vraniskovski, who stated he was tortured in prison because of his religious affiliation and blamed the Macedonian authorities for his mistreatment.

Some leaders of the Bektashi community reported political influence in the religious registration process. The Skopje Basic Court II had no applications for registration pending from previous years and did not receive any new applications for registration during the year.

Smaller religious organizations not listed in the constitution, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Bektashi, and the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid, said the government did not treat religious organizations not listed in the constitution as the equals of the five named organizations. Most religious groups stated the government favored the MOC-OA by granting it unique tax privileges, providing public properties free of charge, offering funding for the construction of new Orthodox churches, and providing exclusive invitations for its representatives to attend government functions. These other religious groups said the ruling coalition's dominant ethnic Macedonian, and predominantly Orthodox, party had politicized religion 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. The MOC-OA remained the sole registered Orthodox group, they said, due to the requirement that religious groups seeking recognition not have names or

MACEDONIA

symbols similar to those of an already registered group. The MOC-OA denied any affiliation with the government and said the church did not involve itself in politics.

The self-declared Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid was awaiting a ruling from the ECHR regarding its application to register as a recognized religious organization, which courts had denied on the legal grounds that it could not substantiate the difference between its name and symbols and those of the MOC-OA. The ECHR had completed the judicial process but had yet to issue a verdict by year's end. According to the MOC-OA, the Archbishopric has a following of approximately 100 members. The Archbishopric, recognized by the Serbian Orthodox Church as the sole legitimate autonomous Orthodox Church in Macedonia, stated that the government had subjected them to media harassment and undue monitoring due to their refusal to recognize the MOC-OA's complete independence from the Serbian Orthodox Church (autocephaly). Archbishopric members also said their numbers are in the thousands, rather than the hundreds.

The Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo), an Islamic Sufi order, continued to await an ECHR ruling on its 2013 appeal asking the ECHR to overturn the Constitutional Court's declaration that the Bektashi's suit regarding the denial of its registration was "inadmissible for review." Judicial officials stated the court had denied the Bektashi's registration application because it was "incomplete." The Bektashi, however, said the court had denied their application because of political interference from the ICM and the government.

The Bektashi reported that their inability to register as an official religious organization meant they could not make independent claims to Islamic religious property, including in the case of a long-running property dispute with the ICM in Tetovo. The ICM continued to occupy most of the Harabati Baba *teqe* compound, a Sufi religious complex in Tetovo, which was also claimed by the Bektashi, limiting the Bektashis' ability to worship there. The Bektashi filed misdemeanor charges of trespassing against those occupying the Harabati Baba *teqe* compound, which were still pending at the end of the year.

Representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses stated their missionaries were subject to harassment by police when distributing religious material. They also expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of time required to obtain required documentation for religious visas but stated these visas had always been granted.

MACEDONIA

In April government officials attended the groundbreaking ceremony for the erection of a 56-meter cross in the Skopje municipality of Aerodrom, and in June government representatives attended the groundbreaking of an Orthodox Church in the same municipality. Various sources said the government had helped fund the construction of the cross and church and had also unfairly facilitated the permit process.

In January a commercial construction project resumed on the site where the former Burmali mosque had stood and to which the ICM had made a legal claim. The ICM said the government continued to refuse to return 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. The government said the Law on Restitution only applied to properties nationalized after 1945, effectively denying restitution of some properties to ICM.

Local and national authorities continued to block the reconstruction of a mosque in Prilep, destroyed during the 2001 conflict, and the construction of a mosque in the village of Lazhec, near Bitola. The ICM said it continued to meet with government officials to try to resolve property issues, but was not able to regain the rightful use of several mosques that the government had agreed to return. The ICM said that in some cases the government continued to block 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.

Small religious groups continued to report bureaucratic obstacles to construction or ownership of houses of worship, which they said were deliberately designed to make it difficult to construct new religious facilities and 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. The Jehovah's Witnesses community filed new lawsuits regarding the transfer, and court decisions were still pending at the end of the year.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Bektashi reported they continued to receive threats from individuals with different interpretations of Islam. They reported two incidents of harassment by ICM-affiliated occupants of the Harabati Baba *teqe* compound in Tetovo, including one involving a female journalist from Turkey and another involving a group of Alawi clerics from Europe.

MACEDONIA

The Holocaust Fund of the Jews from Macedonia worked with the Ministry of Education to create Holocaust education programs to be used in public schools throughout the country. The project brought teachers and students together to share projects across regional borders and to study and create school-to-school partnerships on Sephardic Jewish history and the Holocaust.

Acts of vandalism at cemeteries and religious sites continued. The MOC-OA reported 30 robberies in Orthodox churches throughout the country as of November, the last date for which data was available. In January the MOC-OA placed 400 icons in three different museums in order to protect them from theft and vandalism. In February the Muslim cemetery in Struga was vandalized by unknown perpetrators.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Ambassador, visiting high-level U.S. officials, and other embassy officers discussed issues such as property restitution, interfaith tolerance, and national religious policy with government representatives. Embassy officials also worked to calm tensions by urging political leaders to discourage citizens from engaging in violent protests, particularly following the conviction of six of the defendants in the Smiljkovci case for terrorism.

The Ambassador hosted an interfaith dinner to promote religious and ethnic tolerance. Government officials, representatives of civil society, and members of various religious groups attended, including representatives from the Jewish community, the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Methodist Church, and the Islamic community. The embassy sponsored a speaker program at American cultural and educational centers on religious tolerance and contributed funds toward a dialogue on interfaith understanding between working-level members of the Orthodox, Muslim, and Protestant communities.

An embassy-funded project promoted tolerance and diversity in the education of children from different religious communities.

The embassy gave two grants to the Holocaust Fund of the Jews from Macedonia and supported the Memorial Holocaust Center in its education programs.