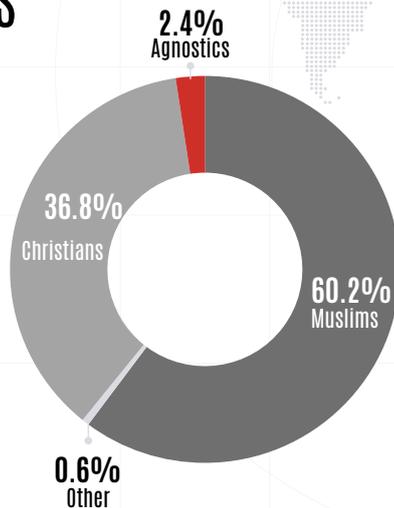




ALBANIA

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

Albania's Constitution,¹ adopted in October 1998, declares "religious coexistence" a basic principle for the state (Article 3). The republic is a secular state (Article 10), which guarantees the freedom of conscience and religion, including the right to choose or change religion or beliefs and to express them "individually or collectively, in public or in private life through cult, education ... or the performance of rituals" (Article 24). Article 18 prohibits discrimination on religious grounds and political parties or other organisations "whose programs or activity are based on totalitarian methods, which incite and support" religious hatred are prohibited (Article 9). Destruction of or damage to religious objects, and the prevention of religious ceremonies are punishable offences.

Religious communities are equal before the law and relations between the state and religious communities are regulated by official agreements (Article 10). The government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups, but the State Committee on Cults

regulates relations between the state and religious communities.²

After decades of enforced atheism under a Communist regime, which collapsed in 1991, the country appears to be experiencing a significant religious revival.

Most citizens traditionally associate themselves with one of four predominant religious communities historically present in the country: two Muslim (Sunni, the majority, and Bektashi) and two Christian (Roman Catholic and the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania).

Because of the government's secular tradition and limited resources, it has reportedly refrained from providing financial assistance for the rebuilding of religious infrastructure destroyed under communism. "We cannot avoid foreign financial help," said Loreta Aliko, head of the State Committee on Cults, conceding that the state has limited resources.³

Delays in the restitution of religious properties that were seized by Enver Hoxha's communist government are criticized by each of the religious communities.

Turkey is perceived as being the most active supporter of Albania's Muslim community and has financed the

construction of the Namazgja Grand Mosque in Tirana, as well as refurbishing older mosques and Sufi lodges across the country.⁴ Meanwhile, the Salafi community has relied on Saudi Arabia for support and scholarships. The Sufi community has also received aid from outside the country: “The Shi’a in Iraq are helping us a lot today,” said Edmond Brahimaj, the Bektashi’s Baba Mondi, or world leader.⁵

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Official figures for religion-biased crimes 2018 and 2019 were not reported to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe for inclusion in the annual hate crime report, but SETA (the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, sponsored by the Turkish government) reported one hate crime with an anti-Muslim bias in August 2018: “A shop wall was vandalized with anti-Muslim graffiti by an organized hate group.”⁶ SETA reported two anti-Muslim crimes in August of 2019 in which “a monument commemorating the victims of a recent anti-government coup attempt in Turkey was vandalized when the names of the dead and a Turkish flag were destroyed with heavy machinery. This was the second such incident targeting the monument to occur in the same year.”⁷

SETA reported in its annual Islamophobia report for 2018 that Islamophobic incidents were often related to anti-Turkish sentiments, such as during commemorations marking the “Year of Scanderbeg” (the 550th anniversary of the death of an Albanian celebrated for his war against the Ottoman Empire).⁸ In its 2019 report, SETA noted that the November 2019 earthquake in Albania was followed by “hate speech and anti-Muslim sentiment on social media” after the Prime Minister posted religious quotes on his Facebook page.⁹ SETA described the phenomenon of Islamophobia in Albania as often relating to criticism of Turkish funding of the Great Mosque in Tirana, and the idea that a majority-Muslim country should not be granted accession to the EU.¹⁰

Due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the Islamic Community and Catholic Church in Albania temporarily suspended all activities and closed mosques and churches in March, except for personal prayer and funerals.¹¹ Restrictions or modifications of worship activities were re-imposed later in the year due to an uptick in cases after a relaxation of the rules.¹²

In May 2020, two unexploded Molotov cocktails were discovered near the Namazgja Mosque under construction in Tirana, in front of the entrance to the Albanian Parliament building. It was not clear which of the buildings was the target.¹³

Albania inaugurated a Holocaust memorial in Tirana in July 2020, to honour the “Albanians, Christians and Muslims [who] endangered their lives to protect and save the Jews.”¹⁴ The small Jewish community living in Albania left the country for Israel just after the fall of the communist regime in 1991.

In October 2020, Albania became the first majority-Muslim country to formally adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of anti-Semitism and to “promise to fight anti-Jewish prejudice.” The decision came a few days before the first “Balkans Forum on Anti-Semitism,” organised by the Albanian parliament.¹⁵ During the forum, Albania’s Prime Minister called anti-Semitism “a threat to our civilization.”¹⁶

The European Commission’s report released in October 2020 on Albania found that freedom of thought, conscience and religion were “generally upheld” and “inter-religious harmony and cooperation continued.”¹⁷

Although in March 2020, the European Council had agreed to open accession negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia, in November, Bulgaria blocked an agreement on a negotiating framework, due to unresolved disputes with North Macedonia over language and history.¹⁸ In December 2020, EU leaders urged an end to the delay, warning Bulgaria that “it risks undermining security in the Balkans - and wider Europe”.¹⁹

In December 2020, protesters threw stones at government buildings, set fire to a Christmas tree in front of the Prime Minister’s office and destroyed Christmas decorations in the Tirana main square after a man was shot by police for not following their orders during the pandemic-related curfew.²⁰

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Religious tolerance between the Islamic Community and the Orthodox and Catholic Churches remains one of the central pillars of stability within Albanian society. In the period under review, relations between Albanian Muslims and Christians continue to be good.

However, religion may be a consideration for this nation, which has been on a path toward accession to the European Union since 2014. If Albania were to join the EU, it would be its first Muslim-majority country. A clash of cultural and political values could develop from that reality, based on the Muslim concept of non-separation of religion and state.

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