

## MACEDONIA

### **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

The government continued to implement the law on religious communities, which requires religious groups to register with the government, although some groups complained that the law was implemented unevenly. Restitution of expropriated properties from the Yugoslav era continued to move slowly.

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

The ambassador and other embassy officers met regularly with religious groups and the government as part of an overall policy to promote human rights.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The country's two major religious groups are Orthodox Christianity and Islam. Approximately 65 percent of the population is Macedonian Orthodox, and 32 percent is Muslim. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, various Protestant denominations, and Jews.

There is a correlation between ethnicity and religious affiliation; the majority of Orthodox believers are ethnic Macedonian, and the majority of Muslim believers are ethnic Albanian.

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

#### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. An antidiscrimination law to protect against different forms of discrimination, including discrimination based on religious beliefs, was implemented on January 1.

There is no official state religion, but a 2001 amendment to the constitution specifically lists five religious groups: the Macedonian Orthodox Church-Ohrid Archbishopric (MOC-OA), the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM), the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish Community, and the Evangelical Methodist Church. Members of other religious groups asserted that the government favored the MOC-OA.

The law requires religious groups to register in order to acquire status as legal entities and states that all registered groups are separate from the state and equal before the law. The law details application materials for new registrants and a timeline in which the court must issue its rulings. The name and official insignia of new groups must be different from the names and insignia of previously registered groups, but the law allows multiple groups of a single faith to register. The courts have interpreted the law to require that the registered leaders of religious groups be Macedonian citizens.

Foreigners associated with registered religious groups who seek to enter the country to carry out religious work or perform religious rites must obtain a visa before arriving. Religious groups reported that the process takes approximately four months.

Private religious primary schools are not allowed under the law, but there are no restrictions on private religious schools at the secondary level and above, or on religious education that takes place in religious spaces, such as churches and mosques.

The Ministry of Education began a new course during the 2010-2011 school year that requires fifth grade students to select from three choices: Introduction to Religions, Ethics in Religion, or Classical Culture in European Civilization. There were no reports of controversy about the introduction of these courses. In 2009 the Constitutional Court ruled that a religious education course, which included a single-faith religious option, was inconsistent with the constitution's separation of church and state.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Easter and Christmas according to the Julian calendar and Ramazan Bajram (end of Ramadan). Other Christian, Islamic, and Jewish holidays are not national holidays, but are government-designated religious holidays for adherents of those faiths.

## Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Implementation of the registration procedures for religious organizations improved. Some groups complained of political influence in the registration process. The dominant MOC-OA remained the sole registered Orthodox group. The Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo), an Islamic Sufi order that is involved in a long-running property dispute with the ICM, has been unable to register, which inhibits restitution of the Bektashi compound in Tetovo. The ICM continued to occupy the Bektashi compound in Tetovo, which limited Bektashi ability to worship.

Skopje Court II, a trial court, is responsible for registering religious groups under a 2007 law. During the year, the court approved one new applicant, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and rejected four applicants: the Bektashi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo), the Ehli Sunet Vel Xhemat, the Bektashi Religious Community (Kicevo), and the True Monastic Community.

The problem of restitution of religious properties expropriated by the former Yugoslav government was not fully resolved. Several religious communities have not regained full ownership of many of the properties expropriated by the communist regime. Ownership of almost all churches and many mosques has been restored to the appropriate religious communities but not most other properties. Restitution or compensation claims are complicated by the fact that the seized properties often have changed hands or have been developed since they were confiscated. The ICM claimed it was not able to regain rightful use of several mosques that the government had agreed to return. In addition, the ICM alleged that in some cases the government delayed the process of restitution by selling or starting new construction on disputed property and by disputing the historical legal claim of the ICM to religious properties. Reconstruction of a mosque in Prilep, which was destroyed during the 2001 conflict, and construction of a mosque in the village of Lazhec in Bitola did not begin as expected in 2011. The ICM continued to meet with government officials to seek to resolve property matters.

Several small religious groups complained of bureaucratic obstacles to construction or ownership of houses of worship and alleged that these obstacles made it very difficult to construct new churches or to enlarge existing structures. At the end of the year, the transfer of ownership of a meeting hall near Kriva

Palanka to the Jehovah's Witnesses remained blocked by the municipal government.

Members of the Orthodox Archbishopric of Ohrid alleged that they were subjected to harassment from some media and undue government monitoring, including being delayed by border guards, which they say was based on their religious beliefs. Led by defrocked MOC-OA bishop Jovan Vraniskovski, this group does not recognize the MOC-OA's self-declared autocephaly. The autocephaly of the MOC-OA also is not recognized by other national Orthodox churches.

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

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

The Bektashi Sufi Community of Macedonia (Tetovo) reported that they continued to receive threats from individuals with differing interpretations of Islam who do not recognize them as a separate community. Critics of the Sufi group also expressed anger that the Sufis displayed the American flag at the Arabati Baba Tekke, the Bektashi compound in Tetovo.

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

The ambassador met with the leaders of all registered religious communities. He and other embassy officers also attended events to foster religious freedom, tolerance, and understanding.

On August 23, the charge d'affaires hosted an iftar in observance of the holy month of Ramadan and to promote religious and ethnic tolerance. The event was attended by members of various religious communities, as well as government officials.

On September 12, the embassy hosted a second annual interfaith food and blood drive with the Red Cross of Skopje. Representatives from several religious communities, including the ICM and the MOC-OA, participated along with government officials such as the minister of defense, the speaker of parliament, members of parliament, and the public. Besides collecting donations, the goal of the event was to bring together persons from different religious groups and ethnicities for a day of community service.