

Religious Freedom in Albania

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Religious freedom, for the past century, is a key indicator of the state of democratic institutions in a nation. What is the situation in Albania?

First, the State's official position on religious freedom is normally reflected in the constitution. The legal and policy framework of Albania is favorable to religious freedom. While the current constitution provides for freedom of religion, there are other laws and policies that have contributed to the generally free practice of religion in Albania.

The 2009 International Religious Freedom report issued by the US Department of State made the following declaration about religious freedom in Albania:



Source: The World Factbook, 2010.

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice...The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Government is secular. According to the Constitution, there is no official religion and all religions are equal; however, the predominant religious communities (Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Catholic) enjoy a greater degree of official recognition (e.g., national holidays) and social status based on their historical presence in the country. Official holidays include holy days from all four predominant faiths.

The Hoxha Dictatorship: A Nightmare for Albania

The state of religious freedom in Albania today is totally different from the period during the Hoxha communist dictatorship. Enver Hoxha, soon after taking leadership of

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the Democratic Front in 1945, instituted drastic changes. Under the August 1945 Agrarian Reform Law, Albania's arable land was redistributed to put an end to large land ownerships and to increase farm output. Properties of religious institutions were among those nationalized, and the holdings of monasteries, religious orders, dioceses and the like were limited to 20 hectares. Many of the clergy and religious followers were tortured and executed. In 1946, all foreign Roman Catholic clergy were expelled—a crippling blow for the numerous Catholic schools and welfare institutions in the country.

The policy of the Hoxha dictatorship stems from Hoxha's own views about religion. He was violently anti-religious, and his announced goal was to make Albania an atheist state. It is for this reason that the communist period in Albania was more severe for the country's religious institutions than most of the other eastern European and Balkan communist countries.

The anti-religious period of the Hoxha dictatorship reached a high point with the 1976 Constitution. Article 55 banned “fascist, anti-democratic, religious, war-mongering, and anti-socialist activities and propaganda...as well as the incitement of national and racial hatred.”

The Hoxha nightmare, which did eventually end, was an anomaly in Albanian life. In previous periods as far back as the 19th century, Albania was known as a land of tolerance. While the 19th and early 20th centuries saw the Muslim noble class as the ruling elite of Albania, these periods were characterized by tolerance for other religious groups. Even after five centuries of Ottoman rule, under which 70 percent of the Albanian population converted to Islam, there was still tolerance of other faiths and beliefs. The various Albanian constitutions before the Hoxha dictatorship all declared that Albania had no official religion, indicated that religions were respected and stated that all Albanians had the right to choose their religious preference or to eschew religious affiliation if they wished. These were the true feelings of the Albanian people, and these feelings and beliefs—along with religious pragmatism—were an intrinsic part of Albanian culture.

The Situation in Albania Today

Once the brutal dictatorship of Enver Hoxha ended, Albania returned to its long, solid tradition of religious tolerance. Today, religious institutions play a major role in the field of education. Prime Minister Sali Berisha has been head of the government since December 2005 and a key figure in Albanian political life since the fall of the communist government. He has been a steady and reliable friend of the United States. In my conversations with Mr. Berisha, it is evident that he is sensitive to the Albanian tradition of religious freedom and tolerance.

Schools

The Ministry of Education in Albania affirms that public schools are secular, and that ideological and religious indoctrination in public schools is prohibited by law. Of the more than 100 educational institutions affiliated with associations or foundations, 15 are

religiously-affiliated.¹ By law the religiously-affiliated schools must be licensed by the Ministry of Education, and curricula are required to comply with national education standards. Numerous state-licensed schools are overseen by Catholic and Muslim groups, which have not had any problems in obtaining licenses for new schools. The strong cultural factor of tolerance is present in the school system of Albania.

Albania and Kosovo

Albania is also setting a very good example for Kosovo, its recently independent neighbor. The challenge in Kosovo for religious freedom may be even greater because of the background of alienation between the Albanian and Serb communities. The Albanian leadership has been a significant force in promoting tolerance in neighboring Kosovo, another predominately Islamic nation.

“The Religion of Albania is Albanianism”

In light of current US policy that calls for the deepening of the dialogue with predominantly Muslim countries, it is fortunate that on the shores of the Adriatic, within the heart of Europe, there is a country where 70 percent of the people subscribe to the Islamic faith and the two predominant Christian faiths—Orthodox Christian and Roman Catholic, constituting 20 and 10 percent of the population respectively—have total freedom.² It is also a fact that this is not a recent phenomenon, but as Vaso Pashko, a 19th century Albanian intellectual, said, “The religion of Albania is Albanianism.” This historic and intrinsic aspect of the Albanian culture serves as an example of religious freedom for other predominantly Muslim countries. It is a major reason for the positive bilateral relationship between the United States and Albania.

In my visits to Albania over the past decade, the main cultural characteristic that is always apparent in this religiously pluralistic state is tolerance. Albanians of the three major religions live in harmony with each other. Pope John Paul II visited Albania on April 25, 1993, and consideration is being given to the establishment of a Catholic university in Albania. As the world community enters the second decade of the third millennium, Albania receives high marks for its commitment to religious freedom and tolerance.

Tolerance is part of the Albanian heritage. The Hoxha dictatorship was a cruel exception. The transition from extreme communist dictatorship in the late 1980s and early 1990s to democracy was difficult, but now democratic traditions have been re-established. With the end of Hoxha’s dictatorship, the Albanian tradition of tolerance soon reemerged as an important factor in the civic and cultural life of the country. Albania shows that religious freedom and Islamic values not only can co-exist, but also can flourish together.

¹ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, United States Department of State. “International Religious Freedom Report,” 2009.

² Percentages are based on estimates as provided in the World Factbook, 2010.