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Country Snapshot Albania

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Country snapshot Albania

By Leonie Vrugtman

Albania has a long history of peaceful religious coexistence and tolerance. Over the centuries, Albanians embraced and assimilated a variety of monotheist religions under the influence of a series of occupying powers; be it Rome, Byzantium or the Ottoman Empire. Aware of this longstanding religious diversity, leaders of the National Renaissance movement in the nineteenth century sought to emphasise an overarching national identity by removing religion from the identity of Albanians. From 1912, when Albania gained independence from the Ottoman Empire, state institutions have embraced secularism. Enver Hoxha, the communist dictator who ruled the country from 1944–1985, suppressed religion through legislation. Organised religion was banned through a 1967 constitutional reform, which prohibited religious literature, initiated the further destruction or repurposing of places of worship and leading to the arrest or execution of religious leaders.¹

Following the collapse of communism in 1991, religious institutions in the country were in an abominable state. Foreign religious foundations, eager to train a new generation of clerics and finance the (re)construction of religious sites, came to the rescue. Some of these had a conservative outlook, which was at odds with the mainstream moderate religious traditions in the country, or they were connected with foreign governments that aimed to advance their influence in the region. During the 1990s, these groups were able to operate in Albania without any restrictions due to weak state institutions, lax borders and high crime rates.² In the early 2000s, the Albanian government and the Albanian Muslim Community (KMSH) took measures to tackle the issue of foreign-backed religious groups. A national action plan against terrorism was adopted in 2002 leading to sweeping enforcement measures.³ Also, to facilitate the re-establishment of religious communities, the government promised compensation for religious buildings, land and other property that was confiscated by the communist regime. The Agency for the Treatment of Property (ATP) was established to manage restitution claims; however, most remain unresolved.⁴

Religious composition of the country

Today, most Albanians lead a secular life. According to a 2018 IDM study on religious tolerance, Albanians have limited knowledge of religion and rarely condition their everyday lives according to religious norms. Instead, the study argues, 'Albanians welcome

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- 1 B. Tönnies, 'Religious persecution in Albania', *Religion in Communist Lands*, 1982, 10(3), pp. 242–255. doi:10.1080/09637498208431032
- 2 S. Woehrel, 'Islamic terrorism in the Balkans', *Congressional Research Service*, 26 July 2005, p. 7
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 US Department of State, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2016 – Albania', 15 August 2017, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dldid=268782>

the religious diversity that is present in the country and strongly reject the idea of the supremacy of a given religion, irrelevant of the size of the religious community'.⁵ Religious coexistence and tolerance are considered a fundamental value, which is also embedded in the country's constitution. There is no official religion, the state is neutral on questions of belief, and freedom of religion is guaranteed.⁶ The state recognises the equality and independence of religious groups and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The four largest religious communities (Sunni Muslim, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Bektashi)⁷ also receive financial support from the state, which is mainly used to cover administrative expenses and the salaries of educational staff.^{8,9}

According to the latest official census in 2011,¹⁰ Sunni Muslims constitute 56.7% of the population; Roman Catholics 10%, Eastern Orthodox adherents 6.8%; members of the Bektashi Order (a sect of Shia Sufism) 2.1%; and the Protestant Evangelical community 0.14%.¹¹ Approximately 2.5% of Albanians identify as atheist, and there are a small number of Jehovah's Witnesses, followers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), in addition to around 40 or 50 Jews living in Albania.¹²

Interreligious issues

Unlike its neighbours, Albania has not been subject to major interreligious conflict. Nonetheless, in the last three decades, some isolated cases of tension have been recorded. In early 2000s, the Bektashi community outside Tirana was the target of vandalism, intimidation and threats of violence, which, according to Bektashi leaders, was the result of the division created by foreign-influenced, intolerant interpretations of religion.¹³ In

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- 5 Institute of Democracy and Meditation, 'Religious tolerance in Albania', 25 April 2018, p. 5, available at: <http://idmalbania.org/religious-tolerance-albania/>
- 6 Constitution of the Republic of Albania, 28 November 1998, Art. 10, translated into English by OSCE, available at: <https://www.osce.org/albania/41888?download=true>
- 7 The Evangelical community does not yet receive financial support, despite being recognised as a religious community.
- 8 See the recognition agreements between the state and religious communities via Albanian State Committee on Cults, available at: <http://www.kshk.gov.al/legjislacioni-per-fene-pas-vitit-1990/>
- 9 Council of Minister Decision 245, 'Agreement on the allocation of funds from the state budget to religious communities', 9 May 2018, available at: www.qbz.gov.al/
- 10 Representatives of all religious communities have stated that the 2011 census presents an inaccurate picture of the religious demographics of the country, not least because the question was optional. The census is available in Albanian and English at: http://www.instat.gov.al/media/3058/main_results__population_and_housing_census_2011.pdf
- 11 At the time of the 2011 census, the Albanian Evangelical Community (VUSH) was not yet an official religious community and has grown significantly since. According to unpublished research conducted by VUSH, the Evangelical Community consisted of approximately 68,000 people in 2014, or 2.2% of the population. See the report 'Raport kërkimor për Ungjillorët në Shqipëri 2003 – 2014' by Reverend Akil Pano.
- 12 World Jewish Congress, Albania (Report), <http://www.worldjewishcongress.org/en/about/communities/AL>
- 13 US Department of State, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2003 – Albania', 18 December 2003, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2003/24328.htm>

2005, media reports targeted Jehovah's Witnesses for being involved in a series of juvenile suicides, although it remains unclear what the involvement of the religious community was, if any.¹⁴ A year later, Shkodra's municipal decision to place a statue of Mother Teresa in the city centre was opposed by a small group of local Muslims. A local Catholic church was vandalised after the installation of the statue. Tensions were lifted with the announcement that the Albanian Muslim Community recognised Mother Teresa as a national rather than religious symbol.¹⁵ In recent years, the majority of complaints regarding religious tolerance have concerned schools banning female students that wear a headscarf.¹⁶ Most public educational institutions do not allow students or staff to wear religious symbols, which has led to several female students being prevented from attending high school or university classes. As a result, many parents and students instead choose private educational institutions, where headscarf are allowed.

In response to current and future challenges, religious communities, in concert with state institutions, have made efforts to enhance interfaith cooperation. A good illustration of this is the increased visibility of the Interreligious Council, which was established in 2007 to promote dialogue and interfaith harmony in the country through joint projects and activities.¹⁷ Over the past few years, the Interreligious Council has met more frequently and has been more broadly engaged, for example by issuing statements on the political situation in Albania and on the EU accession process.¹⁸

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14 US Department of State, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2005 – Albania', 8 November 2005, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2005/51536.htm>

15 US Department of State, 'International Religious Freedom Report for 2006 – Albania', 15 September 2006, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71364.htm>

16 See, US Department of State, International Religious Freedom Reports for 2003, 2009, 2010 and 2015, at: <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2003/24328.htm>; <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2009/127295.htm>; https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2010_5/168289.htm; <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2015&dliid=256157>

17 Interreligious Council of Albania, 'History of the Interreligious Council of Albania', <http://knfsh.al/en/historiku-i-knfsh-se/>

18 Interreligious Council of Albania, 'Press Releases', <http://knfsh.al/en/category/deklarata/>