11-1989

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VIOLATIONS OF FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN ALBANIA

By Barbara Frey

Barbara Anne Frey is a lawyer and executive director of the Minnesota Lawyers for International Human Rights in Minneapolis. This report was presented at a conference on ways to promote the 1981 United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief entitled "Building Understanding and Respect Between People of Diverse Religions or Beliefs" held in Warsaw, Poland, May 14-18, 1989.

I. Introduction

Albania, as a member of the United Nations, has pledged itself to promote, "universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion." As described below, Albania's policies on religion clearly contravene Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

This text may be taken as an elaboration of Articles 55 and 56 of the United Nations Charter. It is the international standard by which to measure Albania's actions, because Albania has not ratified the two major U.N. treaties on human rights: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights or the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Albania is also the only European country that has not accepted the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the "Helsinki Accords").

In 1981, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed by Resolution 36/55 the Declaration on the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief. While a General Assembly Declaration is not legally binding for non-supporting states, such as Albania, the 1981 U.N. Declaration serves as an important statement of customary international law regarding respect for religion or belief. The 1981

\footnote{U.N. Charter, art. 55.}
U.N. Declaration adds detail to the more general Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 4(2) of the 1981 U.N. Declaration requires that, "All States shall make all efforts to enact or rescind legislation where necessary to prohibit any... discrimination [based on religion]...". Article 5(1) of the 1981 U.N. Declaration states that, "The parents... of the child have the right to organize the life within the family in accordance with their religion or belief...".

Against this international legal background, the Socialist People's Republic of Albania adopted legislation in 1967 institutionalizing a campaign to destroy every manifestation of religion. What had been, since the present government came to power in the wake of World War II, an uncoordinated program of coercion, intimidation, and sporadic violence aimed at clergy and their congregations, was transformed into a systematic campaign of repression, violence, and destruction sanctioned by law. Government decrees in subsequent years and an extensive security network further solidified the anti-religious nature of the self-proclaimed "first atheist state in the world." Although Albania claims that religion may be practiced as a private matter, the truth remains that it is the only country in the world that forbids religion in any form, including its teaching, practice, texts, and symbolism.

II. Background

Albania's anti-religion campaign must be examined in light of the role religion played before the current government took power. Centuries of Ottoman rule left Albania with a predominantly Muslim population. A 1938 census provides some sense of Albania's religious composition prior to the present government: 69 percent of the population was Muslim (54 percent Sunni and 15 percent Shiite (primarily Bektashi)), 21 percent was Orthodox Christian (including ethnic Greeks), and about ten percent was Roman Catholic. Indeed, Albania played an important role in the Islamic world, being the seat of the Dede ("great-grandfather" or head) of the Bektashi sect which numbers 7.5 million worldwide. There is also a very

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2Following a movement to Albanize the Orthodox Church in Albania, the National Congress of Berat proclaimed the Church's independence from Constantinople in 1922. Autocephalous status was granted by Constantinople in 1937 (autocephalous status meant that the Albanian Orthodox Church was freed from external control). Henceforth, Albania had both a Greek and an Albanian Orthodox Church.

3Tönnes, Religious Persecution in Albania, 10 RELIGION IN COMMUNIST LANDS 242, 243 (No. 3, 1982).
small Jewish minority in Albania. Figures vary: some estimate that there are about 2,000 or 2,500 Albanian Jews; others say the figure is as low as 200.4

There is a wide consensus among independent observers and the government itself about the role of religion in Albania. One common observation is that Albanians tend not to be devoted to the organized religions.5 Turn-of-the-century travellers recorded that the remotest mountain tribes appeared to have resisted both Christianity and Islam and retained strong pagan traditions.6 Some theorize that those who did convert to Islam under the Ottomans often did so for economic reasons and to escape discrimination.7

Organized religions have been seen as an alien and dividing influence in Albanian history. Partly, this was due to the role of language since, until Albanian independence in 1912, services were held in Arabic, Greek, or Latin depending on the religion. Also, the Ottomans tended to identify nationality with religion so that Muslims were perceived as Turks, Orthodox Christians as Greeks, and Catholics as "Latins."

The government's own actions regarding religion have been based on these same perceptions. The Albanian Party of Labor felt a need to attack what they considered to be divisive in their effort to forge a unified nation. The faiths were also persistent evidence of prior foreign intervention. As one official spokesman writes, "First, our people have not been closely tied to religion. In general, they have not been as pious as other peoples. Our people have not made of religion a world-encompassing theory and philosophy... Second, the reactionary leaders of the clergy have always been on the side of occupiers and enemies of the people... As a result, our people have viewed religion and the clergy as enemies of freedom and of their rights."8

The government leadership found Islam to be less of a threat than, for instance, Catholicism with its seat in the Vatican. In 1982, First Secretary Enver Hoxha stated,

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4Kamm, An Albanian Jew Flees, With Grim Tale to Tell, N.Y. Times, Aug. 30, 1986. The lower figure is based on a 1930 census, prior to an influx of Yugoslav Jews seeking refuge during World War II.


7Christians were taxed and excluded from government positions. SKENDI, THE ALBANIAN NATIONAL AWAKENING: 1878-1912 at 8 and 16 (1967).

8Sadikaj, Revolutionary Movement Against Religion in the Sixties, STUDIME HISTORIKE (No. 4, 1981), translated and reprinted in IV ALBANIAN CATHOLIC BULLETIN 20, 21 (No. 1 & 2, 1983).
"...[T]he hierarchy of the Muslim faith was weak, without the least experience to give us trouble... The rites had been abandoned...[and] were practised only because they 'existed.'\textsuperscript{9}

In fact, some Muslim faithful participated in the early years of the Hoxha government. In 1945, three Bektashi leaders\textsuperscript{10} were elected to the People's Assembly (all three died a few years later under suspicious circumstances). Albania's Islamic ties were useful to both the Albanian and Soviet leadership in their dealings with the Arab world.\textsuperscript{11} Thus, foreign policy concerns also led the government to be more lenient with Muslims. While the other faiths were forced to restrict their foreign connections, in the years immediately after the change in government the Bektashi Dede was encouraged to maintain contact with the faithful in other countries.

III. Religion Under the New Government

The Communist Party of Albania (now known as the Albanian Party of Labour) took power in November 1944. Its new Constitution separated church and state, and affirmed the fundamental right to freedom of belief.\textsuperscript{12} Belying the Constitution, however, anti-religious activity commenced almost immediately after the new government was formed. In August 1945, the government passed an agrarian reform law which deprived religious institutions of much of their property. A series of show-trials and executions were held, following which the Jesuit order was banned in 1946 and the Franciscans in 1947. In 1946, all foreign

\textsuperscript{9}Enver Hoxha's remarks on the Fortieth Anniversary of the Conference of Peza (1982), translated and reprinted in III ALBANIAN CATHOLIC BULLETIN 23, 24 (No. 1 & 2, 1982).

\textsuperscript{10}Their names were Baba Faja, Baba Fejzo, and Sheh Karbunara.

\textsuperscript{11}G. Sinishta, Grave Violation of Religious Rights in Albania 3 OCCASIONAL PAPERS ON RELIGION IN EASTERN EUROPE 3, 7 (No. 3, April 1983).

\textsuperscript{12} Article 15 All citizens are equal, no matter to which nationality, race or religion they belong. Any action which gives privileges to or restricts the rights of individual citizens on account of their nationality, race or religion, is contrary to the Constitution and will lead to the penalties laid down by law. Any provocation which is likely to sow hatred and strife between the nations, races and religions, is contrary to the Constitution and will be punished in accordance with the law.

Article 18 All citizens are guaranteed freedom of opinion and belief. The Church is separated from the State. All religious communities are free in matters concerned with their faith as well as in its practice and outward expression. It is forbidden to misuse the Church and religion for political purposes. Similarly, political organizations with a religious basis are forbidden. The State can give religious communities material support.

From Tönnes, \textit{supra} note 3 at 247.
Catholic priests, nuns, and monks were expelled. Many priests were imprisoned, executed, or assassinated.\(^\text{13}\)

During its first years, the government did not feel the time was ripe for an out-right abolition of religion. The official history states, "The Party could not insult the feelings of a mass of working people, especially in the countryside, who were closely linked with the Party and the people's power, but continued to believe in one or the other religion... The eradication of the religious outlook would come as a result of convincing the masses ideologically."\(^\text{14}\) Rather, the government concentrated its efforts on removing the underlying religious structures. For example, in February 1946, the Fifth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Party of Labour placed all private and church schools under the control of the state. The prestigious Jesuit and Franciscan schools in Shkodër were nationalized the following month. At about the same time, the Ministry of Education banned the teaching of religion in state schools. In April 1947, the Party of Labor recommended introducing anti-religious teaching in schools. The government also attempted to halt religious instruction by clerics and lay-people even within homes.

On 26 January 1949, the government passed Decree No. 743, "On Religious Communities."

The Decree stated that religious practice must not contravene "the laws of the State, law and order and good customs." It also stipulated that pastoral letters and parish announcements be reviewed by local party officials, that religious organizations must serve and be loyal to the state, and that the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion was restricted to places of worship.\(^\text{15}\) Finally, Decree No. 743 ordered each of the four major religious communities, Muslim, Bektashi, Albanian Orthodox, and Catholic, to prepare a draft statute within 90 days pledging the religion's loyalty to the Party and the People's Republic of Albania. When none of the religious communities complied with the government's demands, the Council of Ministers issued statutes on their behalf. Once the statutes were passed, criminal penalties which had formerly protected the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion were removed from the Albanian Penal Code.\(^\text{16}\)

Government attacks against religion intensified particularly after 1960. In that year, First Secretary Enver Hoxha wrote a seminal article in Zëri i Popullit ("Voice of the People")

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\(^\text{13}\)By the end of 1946, a total of 20 Catholic priests had been executed, and over 40 were imprisoned.


\(^\text{15}\)Tönnes, supra note 3 at 248.

\(^\text{16}\)Id.
entitled "On the Sources of Religious Beliefs and How They Should be Combatted". It was taken as a license for action against the religiously devout; henceforth, people with overt religious ties were frequently re-educated or isolated. In any case, they were excluded from the Party.17

In the spring of 1966, the Albanian Party of Labor initiated its Ideological and Cultural Revolution, in tandem with the Cultural Revolution of its new ally, the People's Republic of China. Local youth groups closed their village mosques beginning in May 1966, presaging what was to come. The atmosphere intensified following the Fifth Party Congress later that year. First Secretary Enver Hoxha distributed a public letter on 27 February 1967 entitled "On the Struggle Against Religion, and Religious Conceptions and Customs." He wrote, "We must direct our struggle against religion as much against religious dogmas and the idealistic and mystical viewpoints of religious philosophy, as against religious practices that have penetrated even the daily routine of believers, and indeed even that of non-believers, who sometimes implement them unwittingly, carelessly, often from force of habit."18 The next day, the Naim Frashëri school in Durrës "spontaneously" boarded up all the churches and mosques in that seaport.

The First Secretary's letter sparked a frenzied campaign against religion — one which the Party of Labor characterized as a popular movement merely guided by the Party leadership. Mass meetings were held at which the public denounced the clergy and vowed never to practice religion again. People's tribunals decided which public celebrations were religious in nature and how to replace them with appropriate national atheistic holidays. During public proceedings, crowds turned over their crucifixes, icons, Bibles, and other religious items. Children whose fathers were priests denounced them as fakes, and "thunder sheets" (fletë-rrufe) were posted attacking those parents who had given religious names to their children.

Some clerics handed over religious property and artefacts "voluntarily" to the cooperatives. Others smuggled icons and Bibles to trusted parishioners and instructed them in rites which could be practiced at home. In April 1967, the forty Greek Orthodox priests who were still alive were taken to the city of Delvino (some were taken out of prison for this purpose). There, in a public denunciation, they were shaven19 and their vestments removed.


19Since beards were connected with Orthodox priests, the wearing of beards was outlawed. Until 1983, foreign visitors were shaved at customs.
and spat upon. One priest, Reverend Theodore Zisis resisted the shaving and was consequently imprisoned for ten years.

In April 1967, the government adopted Decree No. 4236 allowing the local executive committees and cooperatives to expropriate without compensation all fixed assets of religious communities and the contents of the religious treasuries. By September 1967, all religious buildings, including 2,169 churches, mosques, monasteries, and others, had been closed. Some were converted into stables, warehouses, cultural centers, or housing. Shkodër Cathedral was turned into a sports center with a basketball court in the old nave. Other buildings were torn down. If people continued to venerate the remaining piles of stones, the sites were cleared. One Albanian theorist describes the Party's thinking:

Although used for economic and cultural purposes, nearly all of [the houses of worship] preserved their former appearance. Apart from other things, this situation reminded believers of the church or the mosque, causing them to continue to regard them as holy places. Such a sight could not but have a negative psychological influence on the younger generation... [I]nstructions were issued to undertake a series of corrective measures. Those religious edifices that interfered with the city or village layout and zoning requirements were to be destroyed and in their place new buildings were to be erected. Likewise religious edifices that were old or threatened to collapse and had no architectural value, were destroyed. As for those edifices that were used for different needs, such as cinemas, houses and hearths of culture, gymnasias, etc., slight renovation work was done on them to change their external appearance.20

All possible signs of religion were eradicated. Graveyards and tombstones were cleared of religious symbols; only the Communist star was permitted. Religious phrases were attacked too: the term "P.K." meaning Përpara Krishtit (in English, B.C.) was replaced by "p.e.r." for para erës sëre ("before the new era").21

The 1946 Constitution protecting religious freedom was still in force during this period of government authorized anti-religious activity. Despite stated constitutional guarantees, the People's Assembly passed Decree No. 4337 on 13 November 1967 (published in Gazeta zyrtare on 22 November) which cancelled the legal status of religion. The Decree annulled Decree No. 743 "On Religious Communities" and the religious community statutes of 1950-51.22 Radio Tirane announced that Albania was now the "first atheist state of the world." Religious freedom was removed from the statutes; it would shortly be removed from the Constitution as well.

20Sadikaj, supra note 8 at 23-24.

21However, one recent traveller heard the old "P.K." used repeatedly. Interview with the Very Reverend Arthur E. Liolin, Chancellor of the Albanian Orthodox Archdiocese in the United States, Boston, Massachusetts, June 1989.

22Please see text above at footnotes 14-16,
In the midst of this tumult, religious observance continued. To the dismay of Party officials, milk consumption fell during Lent in 1967, while sugar demand increased during that year's Muslim festival of Bajram (which marks the end of the fasting of Ramadan). Party officials complained that the public continued to use "salutations, greetings, condolences, oaths and threats that were linked with the name of the creator of the world..."23 In 1968, it was reported that eight old women were caught painting red Easter Eggs in Kosovica; that in Dervitsiani someone said "Christ has Risen" instead of "Good Morning"; and that candles were found lit at some graves.24

By this time, the government had wiped out all forms of organized clergy in Albania. In the first decade of the new government, 28 Islamic leaders were killed.25 Between 1946 and 1960, a total of 26 Greek Orthodox clergy were executed. As described above, the surviving Greek Orthodox clergy had been denounced and stripped. In addition, between 1945 and 1975, the government executed or tortured: 6 Catholic bishops, 4 Monsignors, 56 parish priests, 30 Franciscans, 13 Jesuit Priests, 10 seminarians, and 8 nuns.26 In 1971, it was believed that only 14 Catholic priests were still alive; 12 were in prison and 2 were in hiding. Shortly afterward, one of the two was probably discovered and arrested.27

IV. Current Legal Status of Religion

The new Constitution of 1976 and the new Criminal Code of 1977 codified the Albanian government's campaign against religion, which began in 1946 and intensified in 1967. With the following articles, Albania became the only country in the world to outlaw religion and to mandate the propagation of atheism in its Constitution:

Article 37: The State recognizes no religion whatever and supports atheist propaganda for the purpose of inculcating the scientific-materialist worldview in people.

Article 49: The parents are responsible for the upbringing and Communist education of the children.

Article 55: The creation of any type of organization of a fascist, anti-democratic, religious, or anti-socialist character is

23Sadikaj, supra note 8 at 29.
24Stavrou, supra note 17.
25PUEBLA INSTITUTE, ALBANIA: RELIGION IN A FORTRESS STATE 45 (1989). Please see for full list of names.
26G. SINISHTA, THE FULFILLED PROMISE 68-72 (1976) Please see for full list of names.
27Tønnes, supra note 3 at 252.
forbidden. Fascist, religious, warmongering, anti-socialist activity and propaganda are forbidden, as is the incitement to hatred between peoples and races.

These constitutional restrictions on the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion are supported by the provisions of Article 55 of the 1977 Criminal Code:

Fascist, anti-democratic, religious, warmongering or anti-socialist propaganda, as well as the preparation, distribution or the possession for distribution of literature with such a content in order to weaken or undermine the State or the dictatorship of the Proletariat are punishable by imprisonment of between three and ten years. If these actions occur in time of war or if they have caused particularly serious consequences, they will be punished with imprisonment of not less than ten years or with death.

The government had already instituted another facet of its anti-religious campaign. On 23 September 1975, it passed administrative Decree No. 5339 (also the similar Legislative Decree No. 5354; published on 11 November 1975 in the Gazeta zvrtare) which stipulated that, "Citizens who have inappropriate names and offensive surnames from a political, ideological, and moral standpoint are obliged to change them." The Decree provided that citizens should comply with this voluntarily to avoid the risk of having an appropriate name imposed by the authorities.28 Local civil affairs offices were provided with lists of suitable "national" names for new-born infants. In 1982, the authorities published a sourcebook entitled The Dictionary of People's Names containing over 3,000 "national" names. An Albanian writer describes the government's thinking behind this action:

Everyone chooses names for one's children according to one's wishes, names that are beautiful and have a musical sound, etc. But since we have such beautiful national names, we would not be justified to use foreign names, which express nostalgia for religion and a fascination with things foreign... Therefore, it is legitimate to insist on the use of national names, so that... the names of people do not become an indicator of the religious affiliations and divisions of yesteryear in the eyes of future generations.29

The legislation has had an effect, but primarily as a supplement to the on-going anti-religion campaign. A survey done in Himarë, for example, shows that the greatest decrease in the use of religious names occurred before the new Decree. Religious names made up 80 percent of all personal names in Himarë during 1945-1950. They decreased to 40 percent during 1970-1975 (the period just prior to the Decree); following that, religious names only decreased to 30 percent of all personal names by 1984. Of course, government officials decry the continuing persistence of religious names.30

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28P. PRIFTI, supra note 5 at 164.


30Id.
There is some doubt whether adults had to change their names. Some believe that the campaign was only for newborns.³¹ A Catholic, DD,³² who was interviewed confirmed this. He said, however, that individuals would be urged to change their names at school as a way of earning ideological merit. Another Catholic, CC, agreed, but added that she had been under very strong pressure to change her name to a non-religious version. She had refused but nothing had happened to her. One commentator states that negative publicity abroad caused the Albanian government to halt retroactive enforcement of the name-change campaign.³³

Enforcement of the name-change program apparently varies. Well-placed government employees can and do use their connections to get non-authorized names approved.³⁴ Individuals bearing Christian -- especially Greek Orthodox or Catholic names -- seem most directly affected by the name-change program. Muslims, as members of the majority group, must disavow foreign names but not religious ones. Some outside analysts point to the name-change program as evidence that the anti-religion campaign was primarily nationalistic rather than ideological.³⁵ One commentator writes, "There is no convincing evidence to suggest that the same policies were applied in the case of the Muslim majority. Had that been the case, [First Secretary Enver] Hoxha [which means Islamic religious leader in Albanian] should have been the first one to change his own name, followed by four other Politburo members whose surnames are of religious origin."³⁶ This has been borne out in Minnesota Lawyers Committee interviews with recent escapees. A Muslim, U, who came over the border recently, said that the name-change program did not have anything to do with religious names. Rather, foreign names like Elvira, Enrika, and Augustus were excluded. Other Muslims interviewed (R, S, and Q family) had not been affected by the name changes at all. In contrast, D, a Greek Orthodox, had had to remove the prefix "Theo-" from his surname. Another ethnic Greek, U, found his first name changed into its Turkic version

³¹Interview with Imam Vehbi Ismail of the Albanian Islamic Center, Harper Woods, Michigan, June 1989. One escapee who was named after a saint reported that he was not pressured into changing his name. Escapee's testimony: GG.

³²Subjects of MLC interviews are identified by anonymous code for the sake of their protection. Each interviewee has been assigned a letter, which is used consistently to identify the speaker.


³⁴Escapee's testimony: CC.

³⁵Stavrou, supra note 17.

³⁶Id.
when he attended elementary school. Only then did he realize the existence of this other "legal" name which differed from the one his family called him by.

At about the same time as the personal name campaign, the government adopted Decree No. 225 in September 1975 which required changing geographic place names that contained religious meanings. This primarily affected names containing the prefix, "Saint." The village of Shënkoll (St. Nicholas) was renamed Ylli i Kug (meaning "The Red Star").³⁷ In the southern (mainly ethnic Greek) area, approximately 90 towns and places named after religious figures received new or changed names³⁸ for example, Agios Nikolaos (St. Nicholas) was changed to Drita (meaning "Light").³⁹

V. Current Religious Practice in Albania

The Minnesota Lawyers Committee has two primary observations regarding religion as it is now practiced in Albania. First, the government's actions have been extremely effective in abolishing formal religious practice. Second, some practice remains tenaciously in place, particularly in private homes. However, because of the severity of the campaign, religious practice in Albania is limited and fragmentary.

Attacks against any surviving clergy have continued since 1967. Father Shtjefen Kurti was originally imprisoned in 1967 for opposing the destruction of a church. He was tried in 1971 for baptizing a child at the request of its mother at his labor camp. He was executed in February 1972. (However, Radio Tirana announced that he had been executed in 1970 for espionage.) In 1977, the Catholic priest Fran Mark Gjoni was imprisoned for 12 years for possessing Bibles.

In 1974, the government sentenced the three remaining Catholic bishops to detention camps for conducting religious services in private. Bishop Antonin Fishta died at his camp. Another, Bishop Coba, was caught holding an Easter service for Catholic prisoners at his camp in 1979. Police attacked the group and the Bishop died the following morning from his injuries. The other prisoners were deprived of food for 24 hours and warned against participating in any more religious "manifestations." The only surviving Catholic Bishop,

³⁷Sadikaj, supra note 8 at 22.
³⁸Stavrou, supra note 33 at 19.
³⁹Escapees' testimonies: K and O.
Nikoll Troshani, is presumed either to still be in Tepelana Labor Camp near Vlorë or released. There are recent reports that he may be living with relatives now in Lezhe. 40

The Jesuit priest, Father Ndoc Luli, was imprisoned in May 1980 for baptizing his nephew’s newborn twins at the request of the nephew’s wife. Both Father Luli and the wife were arrested and interrogated. The wife was sentenced to 8 years hard labor; Father Luli received a sentence of “life until death.” There has been speculation that he is now dead. Another Jesuit, Father Pjetër Meshkalla, was arrested in 1985 during a secret Christmas celebration. He was sent to Ballsh Labor Camp, even though he had already spent a total of 35 years in prison before being granted amnesty in 1983 on the grounds of ill health. Father Meshkalla died at Ballsh on 28 July 1988.

Reports of those clergy who remain incarcerated are scanty. In 1985, Amnesty International provided the following list:

The few priests and religious still alive remain in prison and forced labor camps. Among these is Mark Hasi who, for the second time, is serving a long prison sentence for ‘conducting religious services.’ Confined to labor camps are also Fathers Injac Gjoka, Rrok Gjuraj, Ndoc Sahatcia, Zef Nikolla, Ndrec Gega, Jesuit Gjergi Vata, Simon Jubani, and Simon’s older brother, Lazer, Fran Iliia, Federik Mazi, and two Franciscans. 41

There are unverified reports that some priests have been released, including possibly Mikel Koliqi and Simon Jubani. 42 It has also been reported that Lazer Jubani died under suspicious circumstances in 1982.

Interviews reveal that there may still be clergy practicing in Albania. CC reported that she used intermediaries to request that a priest say prayers on her behalf. GG confirmed that individuals would secretly ask the local priest to say prayers for deceased relatives. 43 There are also former clergy living in Albania who felt compelled to stop practicing their vocation. One of the refugees interviewed, P, reported that his father had been an Orthodox priest. He stopped his ministry when the new government came to power. He did not conduct secret rites for people in their village. The father changed professions to become a teacher, but lost his position when he was ordered to help destroy churches and refused. P said that he grew up with no icons or any religious artefacts in the house, since the parents were fearful of being betrayed. The parents did try to teach the children something about Christianity, but stopped praying together when their church was torn down.

40 In particular, an Italian journalist heard this while visiting Albania in September 1988. PUEBLA INSTITUTE, supra note 25 at 27.


42 PUEBLA INSTITUTE, supra note 25 at 43.

43 GG named the priest, however we omit to do so in this report for the sake of the priest’s safety.
It appears from interviews that those caught with religious artefacts receive severe punishments. One interviewee, I, told us that in 1988 a man was caught in his town wearing a crucifix and was sentenced to 5 years in prison. This is not substantiated, however. Another interviewee, L, gave us an unsubstantiated report that he personally knew individuals who had been sentenced to 10 years for possessing a Bible. Still, it is clear that individuals do continue to own religious artefacts. We were shown a crucifix carried out of Albania by Z. He said that both he and his mother had sewn their crosses into their undergarments. His mother also had icons which she kept hidden. DD reported that his family has kept an old Nativity scene and figures which, although quite battered, are still brought out every Christmas.

Another escapee, V, recounted a personal experience which occurred while he was attending school in 1983 or 1984. When his grandfather died, he inherited a small crucifix of gold or silver which he wore around his neck on a chain. He usually wore it concealed under his clothing. One day after sports, another student saw V wearing his cross in the shower. V was denounced and two policemen arrived. They confiscated the cross and beat him with truncheons in front of an assembly of the whole school. The police stopped only after he was down on the floor and not moving. V recalls bleeding badly about the nose and lips. After the police left, friends came up and helped him. V believes he was not formally charged or arrested because the officers kept the cross to melt down the metal for themselves.

V's family did not celebrate Christmas or Easter in front of him for fear of denunciation, although V did learn from his grandfather that his parents were celebrating those holidays in private.

Many interviewees told us that children are the main form of government enforcement, and that parents are forced to practice their faith secretly and away from their children. V informed us that up through 4th grade he was taught to watch for any religious practices in his family and to denounce his parents. The students were promised better grades. In his school, one boy denounced his family several times and thereby improved his report card considerably; seeing this, another boy denounced his parents too. V said that after 4th grade, the government does not use children as much, since by then they are better inculcated with family loyalties. This confrontation between family and ideology is enunciated by one Party theorist: "We realize that the family is the last fortress harboring religious remnants that has to be occupied. And no one can occupy it better and easier than the school and its pupils who, true enough, listen to their parents, but who give more weight in these matters to the lessons, ideas and example of the teacher." 44

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44Hako, supra note 29 at 29.
The use of children against religion has been formalized into the Cultural Youth Brigades. These Brigades are made up of youth group leaders who travel throughout the country to investigate any attitudes or practices which deviate from the Party practice. When the Brigades encounter signs of deviationism, they organize meetings with the local youth to "re-educate" them. Zëri i Rinise ("Voice of the Youth"), the official weekly of the Albanian Youth Organization, reported on the Brigades' activities in its 29 July 1987 edition, and, "stressed their need to fight 'backward customs, superstitions, and recalcitrant religious practices.'" It reported that there were seventy Brigades operating in the country at that time.45

Escapees report that Albanians may be losing full understanding of their faith even when they practice it at all. Interviewee V told us that he had not known that wearing a crucifix and celebrating Christmas and Easter were part of the Christian faith. Only upon escaping Albania did he find out what religion his family had practiced. Similarly, one of the escapees, BB, remembers seeing his father closing the door and curtains in order to mumble certain words. Only when he was being interviewed by us together with a fellow escapee, AA, who recited a few words of a Muslim prayer did he realize those were the words his father had murmured and that his father was Muslim. A recent visitor reports that while there are many mosques and churches being restored as cultural sites, the restorers complain that they lack the necessary cultural and religious heritage. At one particular mosque, the craftsmen said that they could not duplicate the rich calligraphy that had been there earlier.46

Several interviewees told us of another way in which the government enforces the anti-religion program. During fasts -- the Christian Lent and the Muslim Ramadan -- individuals come and offer food (especially dairy products) or cigarettes to try to uncover believers. This happens at home (testimonies of T and the Q family), in school (testimony of D), and in the workplace (testimony of S). T said that his family felt forced to break their fast whenever this happened. S worked in a factory in Tirane and told us that those who refused the food were publicly denounced.

Against this harsh backdrop, there are signs that religious practice continues. A recent visitor to Albania recounted that his tour group spotted an old woman at an abandoned chapel in Durrës on Easter Sunday. She was lying face-down in front of the ruins.47 While those who refuse to change their names risk public ridicule and discrimination, several

46Interview with Imam Vehbi Ismail, supra note 31.
interviewees, including A, told us that their families would select an official name for use in public and continue to call their children by religious names in their homes. Certain practices are easier to maintain than others. There are unsubstantiated reports that Muslims are still buried oriented towards Mecca. The Q family said that they fasted during Ramadan, but no longer celebrated the feast of Bajram since that entailed buying and cooking special foods -- a more visible activity. S said that his family practiced both Muslim holidays. However, that may be because S came from Tirane and the Q family came from a small village; presumably it is easier to purchase extra supplies unnoticed in the capital. When Samuel Matathia fled Albania, he provided some insight into life within the Albanian Jewish community. He said that the only communal practice consisted of secret gatherings at which traditional Sephardic sweets were shared in memory of the dead.48

People carry on certain religious rituals without the guidance of religious leaders. The wife of the Q family was most upset at the fact that when a Muslim dies no longer can a hoxha (religious leader) or his wife cleanse the body of the deceased. Now, since the deceased cannot be buried uncleansed, the interviewee said that families must do the bathing hurriedly late at night. In one village, large groups reportedly still gather to pray at the site of a torn-down church. No priest is present so a village elder serves as a lay minister.49

Even the government acknowledges that the anti-religion campaign has not succeeded in totally eradicating with religion. For example, it appears that marriages continue to occur primarily among members of the same religion. A 1980 survey conducted by a government sociologist revealed that less than four percent of Albanian marriages are between individuals of differing religious backgrounds. This is decried by an official writer:

...[W]hen it comes to forming marriage ties, and uniting two people of different ex-religious backgrounds, its not an easy matter even today. In certain cases a barricade is put up, and the most varied obstacles and 'reasons' are fabricated by the parents, grandparents and close relatives... [S]ocial opinion, the organizations of the Youth, the [Democratic] Front, etc., ought to rise up and react in an organized manner whenever backward mentalities and religious motives become obstacles to ... love...50

In the 1980s, in the face of increasing international pressure regarding its anti-religion campaign, the Albanian government began publicly to justify its religious policy on the basis that religious belief is still a matter of personal right and that religion was abolished only through the will of the populace. In a speech given on 10 November 1982, First Secretary Enver Hoxja stated, "As for religion, you need not worry about it. To believe or not to

48Kamm, supra note 4.
49Escapee's testimony: GG. GG said that he had been to these gatherings three times. He estimated that the crowds were as big as 100-300 people. Id.
50Hako, supra note 29 at 32.
believe is a personal right, a question of conscience, and not an institutional question: religion cannot be imposed according to the desire or will of the Hoxjas, the Bishops, or the Pope of Rome. Why all this astonishment at Socialist Albania? Our state is atheistic by the will of its people."

While the statement of First Secretary Hoxha acknowledges the right to religious belief, the government of First Secretary Ramiz Alia, who assumed the leadership of Albania after First Secretary Hoxha’s death in April 1985, goes slightly further toward tolerance of actual religious practice. In a 9 May 1988 letter from the Permanent Representative of Albania to the U.N., the Alia governmental position is presented as follows:

There is genuine freedom of conscience in Albania. The question of religious belief in Albania is also regarded as a right, a private issue which is an individual matter of conscience. The Albanian people, of their own free will and without any outside coercion, decided for themselves what their attitude would be to religious institutions; for that reason, in Albania, no one can force people to believe in God or to perform religious rites. That does not mean, however, that believers do not perform these rites. Ultimately, this a personal and family matter.

Other observers have noted a change in the government’s attitudes concerning religious practice. Dr. Elez Biberaj, head of the Albanian Service of the Voice of America, says, "The anti-religious campaign continues, but it is significantly less intensive than during the Hoxha era."

The government has demonstrated increased tolerance in more concrete ways. In 1986, two Americans, Dr. and Mrs. E. E. Jacques, were allowed to visit the country. The Jacques had been missionaries in Albania during the 1930s. They had repeatedly been denied visas by the government of First Secretary Hoxha. In 1988, three clergymen were permitted to visit Albania for brief periods: The Very Reverend Arthur E. Liolin, Chancellor of the Albanian Orthodox Diocese in the United States; Imam Vehbi Ismail, Director of the Albanian Islamic Center in Harper Woods, Michigan; and Jesuit Father Ndoc Kelmendi. Reverend Liolin was able to travel around Albania in his clerical garb and led prayers on seven different occasions in cemeteries, without government disruption. Reverend Liolin noted that Albanians brought liturgical bread to these prayers. Individuals must still have liturgical seals since the Reverend noticed that the loaves had the traditional pattern of crucifixes embossed on them. Reverend Liolin was also permitted to retain a personal copy

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52 Biberaj, Costa and Lico, Albania: Experiments in Reform, FREEDOM AT ISSUE 8 (March-April 1988).
of the Bible during his visit to Albania. Both Reverend Liolin and Imam Ismail noted extensive restoration of mosques and churches, albeit as cultural sites.

These visits are significant considering the history of the Albanian government's forty-year anti-religion campaign. It is, however, extremely difficult to quantify any meaningful opening for religious practice among the Albanian people. While the government's stated policy concerning religious practice may appear to be less rigid under the leadership of First Secretary Ramiz Alia, personal expression of religious belief can be carried out only in a severely restricted fashion and at great personal and social risks.

VI. Conclusions

It seems clear that the Albanian government's decades-long campaign against religion was based on both ideological and policy concerns. After centuries of Ottoman and other foreign rule, the new leadership felt that the country was vulnerable to external influence and internal dissent. The government used various means toward its goal of abolishing religion. Legislation and constitutional amendments expropriated religious property and criminalized religious faith. Imprisonment and executions wiped out the country's entire organized clergy. Religious buildings have either been torn down or converted into secular uses. Personal and geographic names have been systematically changed.

In the midst of these policies, religious devotion continues in Albania. Forms of religious practice, however, appear to have been reduced to fragments such as hastily mumbled prayers, secret gatherings and hidden artefacts. Sadly, we have met individuals who, while they may follow some practice themselves, do not even know what religion they are practicing.

The Albanian government maintains that religious belief is a personal right and that it was the Albanian people who voluntarily rid themselves of religion. Officials now go further and state that religious practice is a personal right as well. Historical evidence and numerous recent testimonies disprove the government's assertions. The government worked actively and publicly to expunge religion from all aspects of Albanian life, and now individuals express their religious beliefs only at great risk. Albania's Constitution and Penal Code retain their harsh condemnation of religious practice. The evidence overwhelmingly shows that the Albanian government has violated and continues to violate international norms concerning the freedom of religion, as enunciated in Article 18 of the Universal

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53 Interview with the Very Reverend Arthur E. Liolin, supra note 21.

54 Id., and interview with Imam Vehbi Ismail, supra note 31. Please see text, supra at note 46.
Declaration of Human Rights and the 1981 U.N. Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief.