



Albania



Stable / Unchanged —

Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **60.8%**
- Christians : **36.5%**
- Agnostics : **2.4%**
- Others : **0.3%**

2,904,000

28,748 Km²

Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

Albania's constitution, adopted in October 1998, declares the republic to be a secular state which "observes the freedom of religious beliefs and creates conditions to exercise it". Article 24 confirms: "Everyone is free to choose or change his religion or belief, as well as to express them individually or collectively, in public or in private life through cult, education... or the performance of rituals."^[1] Article 18 prohibits discrimination on religious grounds.^[2] Destruction or damage of religious objects and prevention of religious ceremonies are punishable offences.

Some Albanians self-identify as belonging to ethnic groups directly linked in some cases to a particular religion. According to the 2011 census, these ethnic groups are: Albanians 82.58 percent, Greeks 0.87 percent, Romani 0.3 percent, Vlachs 0.3 percent, Macedonians 0.2 percent, Balkan Egyptians 0.12 percent, other 15.63 percent^[3]

The government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups.

The State Committee on Cults, founded in September 1999, regulates relations between the state and religious communities. The committee keeps records and statistics of foreign religious organisations which contact it for assistance. In addition, religious groups may acquire the official status of a juridical body. This can be done by registering with the Tirana District Court under the Law on Nonprofit Organisations, which recognises the status of a non-profit association regardless of whether the organisation has a cultural, religious, or humanitarian character.^[4]

The Committee on Cults lists a total of 245 religious groups, organisations and foundations that include the nation's four traditional religions – two Muslim (Sunni and Bektashi) and two Christian (Roman Catholic and the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania). Other groups present include various Protestant denominations, as well as Bahai's, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and a small Jewish community.

The government has separate bilateral agreements with the Roman Catholic Church, the Albanian Islamic Community, the Albanian Orthodox Church, the World Bektashi and the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania, a Protestant umbrella organisation.

The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools.

According to official figures, religious groups run 103 educational institutions through affiliated associations and foundations. These schools must be licensed by the Ministry of Education and Sport. Catholic and Muslim groups operate numerous state-licensed schools. The Orthodox Church operates licensed religious schools and a university.

In October 2016 the Parliament of Albania passed a resolution condemning crimes carried out by the former communist regime against religious individuals. The Agency for the Restitution and Compensation of Property was founded to grapple with religious estate issues. The agency delivered property certificates for hundreds of religious buildings. However, the restitution of properties belonging to religious groups has not been completed. The government allocated EUR€740,000 to the five official religious communities in April 2017. The electricity fee for religious buildings was lowered.^[5]

Muslims in Albania are divided into two communities: those who adhere to a moderate form of Sunni Islam and those who adhere to the Bektashi School (a particularly liberal form of Shia Sufism). Bektashi Sufis, with two million followers in Albania, are the only indigenous Shia Muslims in Europe (except for some Turkish Shia in a small area of Turkey). The Bektashis do not require women to wear veils. They allow women in Khabes (equivalent of church or mosque), and do not pray in Arabic. The Holy See of World Bektashism is established in Albania.

Christianity in Albania was introduced in the 1st century. The remains of many Paleochristian churches, dating to the earliest times of Christianity can be found across the country. At the time of the Turkish invasion at the end of the 15th century, northern Albania was overwhelmingly Catholic, while mid and southern Albania were mainly Orthodox.

The communist revolution of 1945 marked the beginning of extreme persecution of all religious groups. Albania became the first officially atheist country in the world in 1967. Its ruler, Enver Hoxha, ordered all religious edifices including 2,169 churches, mosques, and monasteries to be demolished or converted into sports arenas, warehouses or other secular facilities. About 300 clergymen were condemned to death, to prison or to deportation. Until communism collapsed in 1991, public expressions of faith were banned.^[4]

The religious and intellectual leaders of the Albanian Catholic community were wiped out. Of the seven bishops and 200 priests and nuns in Albania before the communist takeover, only one bishop and 30 priests and nuns were found alive when the communist regime ended. After the fall of Communism, the Catholic Church had to restart its mission almost from scratch. A few new churches have been built and parishes and dioceses established. Seminaries have opened. St John Paul II made a one-day visit to the country in 1993, during which he ordained four bishops. The first Albanian cardinal was named in 1994. In April 2016 Pope Francis recognised 38 Albanian martyrs killed during the Communist terror.

In 1992 the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania was re-established. After the fall of communism, 250 Orthodox churches were built or re-opened. 100 local priests were ordained.

The Evangelical community has about 3,000 members in 160 churches of all denominations, including Baptist, Brethren, and Lutheran.

Relations between Albanian Muslims and Christians have generally been good. Members of small and culturally-isolated

faith groups find national unity more important than religious differences. In Tirana, the capital city, Muslims and Christians share a common cemetery.

In November 2016, 20,000 Albanians and their guests attended Mass in Shkoder Shen Shtjefni Cathedral to witness the beatification of 38 Catholics who were persecuted and died under Enver Hoxha's regime. The martyrs' beatification process was begun in 2002 and was completed in 2010. Pope Francis signed a decree that authorised the beatification to take place on 5th November 2016.^[6]

In December 2017, the President Ilir Meta of Albania granted Albanian citizenship to Archbishop Anastasios, head of the Albanian Orthodox Autocephalous Church (AOAC). In his letter, the president stressed the great contribution of the archbishop "for the complete canonical and spiritual revival of the Orthodox Autocephalous Church of Albania"^[7]

In January 2015 the leaders of the four main religions in Albania – the head of the Muslim Community, the head of the Orthodox Church, the leader of the Bektashi Muslims and the head of the Catholic Church, walked side by side in Paris, France, in support of the Charlie Hebdo victims.^[8]

According to an Albanian Institute of Democracy study conducted in 2017, 73 percent Albanians believe in religious institutions more than anything else.^[9]

| Incidents

Research suggested there were no incidents of significance to the topic under review during the two-year reporting period.

| Prospects for Freedom of Religion

Religious tolerance between the Islamic Community and the Orthodox and Catholic Churches remains one of the central pillars of stability within Albanian society. However, lack of education, poverty and unemployment of young people provide fertile ground for Islamist ideological indoctrination.

That said, Turkey's growing economic and cultural influence in Albania may have significant impact on inter-religious relations in the near future. The EUR 30 million construction project of the biggest mosque in the Balkans, to be built in Tirana city centre is the most visible sign of increasing Turkish ambition in this country. It remains to be seen whether the growing Turkish interest in Albania will prevail over EU membership goals and whether the geopolitical stakes will affect freedom of religion in this Balkan country.

| Sources / Endnotes

[1] Constitution of the Republic of Albania, 28th November 1998, article 24, section 2 (accessed 29th May 2018), <https://www.osce.org/albania/41888>

[2] Ibid

[3] Census Knowledge Base, 'Albania 2011 Census – A New Urban Rural Classification of Albanian Population', 2014 – <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/censuskb20/KnowledgebaseArticle10728.aspx> (Accessed, 29th May 2018)

[4] Decision 459 For the Establishment of the State Committee for Cults, 23rd September 1999 (accessed February 24, 2018), <http://www.legislationline.org/topics/country/47/topic/78>

[5] European Commission, 'Albania 2018 Report', 17th April 2018, Strasbourg, (accessed 30th April 2018), <https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/20180417-albania-report.pdf>

[6] Oculus News, Albanian Martyrs beatified by Catholic Church, November 2017, <http://www.ocnal.com/2016/11/albanian-martyrs-beatified-by-catholic.html>(accessed 24th February 2018),

[7] Ilda Mara, A Christmas Gift to the Orthodox Community in Albania, 25th December 2017, Albanian Daily News, <http://www.albaniannews.com/index.php?idm=17493&mod=2> (accessed 24th February 2018),

[8] Simon Crerar, The Albanian delegation at the Paris anti-terror march made a particularly powerful picture, BuzzFeed, 12th January 2015, https://www.buzzfeed.com/simoncrerar/albanian-delegation-paris-march?utm_term=.dalr0bznz#.kgGXRrLWL (accessed 24th February 2018)

[9] Institute for Democracy and Mediation, Public Opinion Poll “Trust in Governance 2016”, UNDP, 10th February 2017, http://www.al.undp.org/content/albania/en/home/library/democratic_governance/opinion-poll-trust-in-governance-2016-.html (accessed 30th April 2018)