

Kosovo



Stable / Unchanged ▬

Religion

Population

Area

- Muslims : **93.1%**
- Christians : **5.9%**
- Others : **1.0%**

2,095,000

10,908 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The Republic of Kosovo is, according to the country's constitution, a secular state and is neutral in matters of religious belief. The constitution also protects and guarantees freedom of religion. Article nine of the constitution states that the republic "ensures the preservation and protection of its cultural and religious heritage". Article 24 guarantees the equality of all and prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion. Article 38 guarantees freedom of belief, conscience and religion. Article 39 enshrines the protection of religious denominations.

The basic Law on Freedom of Religion in Kosovo came into force on 1st April 2007^[1] The law has been heavily criticised both by religious communities and international organisations. The lack of clear regulations on registration and financing as well as on construction of religious sites and creation and maintenance of graveyards are of major concern to religious communities.

At the end of 2011, the government proposed amendments to the law intended to help solve the registration problem. Five religious communities are deemed by the draft law to "constitute the historical, cultural and social heritage of the country". These will automatically be registered.^[2] The faith communities in question are the Islamic Community of Kosovo, the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, the Jewish Community and the Evangelical Protestant Church. The draft law^[3] provides that the Office for the Registration of Religious Communities, acting within the Ministry of Justice, shall issue registration certificates to these five religious communities, and provide them with the status of legal persons.

New religious communities can be registered if they have at least 50 members.^[4] The Office for the Registration of Religious Communities is required to make a decision within 30 days of receipt of a request for registration.^[5] A negative decision can be appealed before the competent court within 30 days. Those religious communities which do not meet the

conditions for registration will not have legal recognition.

The Council of Europe's Venice Commission published its view on the amendment of the Law on Freedom of Religion outlining the need for a number of improvements. These included expanding the list of religious communities that "constitute the historical, cultural and social heritage of the country" from five groups to include all other established religious groups.

The tiny community of Catholics in Kosovo, estimated at 60,000, is mostly concentrated in Gjakova, Prizren, Klina and a few villages near Pec and Vitina. There are 33 Catholic churches, 36 priests and 70 religious Sisters. There is great pride that Saint Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa) was Albanian. The main boulevard in Pristina and a Catholic cathedral are named after the nun who heard her calling to join the mission in the church of Letnica, in south-east Kosovo. Saint Teresa's canonisation by Pope Francis in 2016 was celebrated by Albanians all over the Balkans. For a long time before this, Catholic and Muslim Albanians promoted Saint Teresa as Mother of all Albanians.

Although 18 years have passed since the Kosovo conflict, its legacy casts a long shadow over relations among Kosovan inhabitants. According to the International Commission for Missing Persons report from 2017, 4,500 people disappeared during the war, more than 1,600 of whom remain missing.^[6] Inter-ethnic tensions between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs continue.

It is believed that around 315 Kosovo citizens have travelled to war zones in Syria and Iraq which makes Kosovo Europe's biggest contributor of foreign fighters to Daesh (ISIS) per capita. According to intelligence officials, more than 33 percent have already returned.^[7]

Incidents

Many of the relevant incidents arise from religious tensions related to land and property disputes, as well as allegations of foreign interference in the promotion of a particular religious viewpoint.

On 17th September 2017, after two years of litigation, Kosovo's Court of Appeal ruled against Pristina University and granted the Serbian Orthodox Church land ownership rights to Christ the Saviour Church. The construction of the church was initiated by the Milosevic regime in the mid 1990s on land previously owned by Pristina University. It has remained unfinished since the war for independence in Kosovo ended in 1999.^[8]

Allegations of renewed interference from abroad sometimes relate to the construction of religious buildings, including the construction of the Pristina Central mosque. The mosque has still not been built in spite of the cornerstone being laid in the city district of Dardania back in 2012.^[9] Even though 17 architectural plans were submitted, none of them were accepted by the Islamic Community of Kosovo. Later on, the Islamic community accepted the architectural plans submitted by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), which appeared to be the main donor for the project, worth more than €40 million. Some Pristina politicians and civil groups have strongly opposed the architectural plans. According to them, the Osman style architecture is a copy of the Turkish Edrene mosque and completely out of keeping with the existing Dardania District Neighbourhood Settlement Plan.

In December 2017 a statement by the newly elected Deputy Mayor of Pristina, Selim Pacolli, brought new heat to what was already hot topic. During a television interview, he supported building a mosque on the campus of Pristina University provided the university was relocated to the countryside. The Pristina City Administration said it did not support Pacolli's proposal. A student organisation, Student Democracy, expressed concern about the deputy mayor's alleged plan "to turn the university campus into an Islamic centre".^[10] Outrage in response to this proposal took the form of graffiti at the university campus threatening Kosovan President Hashim Thaci over plans to build a new mosque in the capital. According to Fox News, the Kosovo police were investigating the case. The Islamic Community of Kosovo has invited students not to be influenced by individuals who call for violence, defamation and intolerance.

This is not the only mosque that provokes strong reactions in Kosovo. According to Balkan Insight, more than 100 mosques have been built without permission in the past 10 years.

In September 2017, the Kosovo President Hashim Thaci officially visited the Vatican. He presented the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to Pope Francis. The commission's ultimate goal is to encourage mutual forgiveness among Kosovan Albanians and Serbs. The commission was established in February 2017!^[11]

On 15th February 2017 anti-Serb graffiti appeared in several places close to the Serbian Orthodox church in Gnjilane, as well as on the road to the Serbian village of Donja Budriga!^[12]

In June 2017 Florim Neziraj, the Head of the Islamic Community in Kacanik (a town in the southern part of Kosovo), was dismissed from his post after announcing the death of Daesh leader Lavdrim Muhaxheri over the local mosque's loud speakers.^[13] The general public has strongly condemned his behaviour. The self-proclaimed Kosovan Daesh commander was killed in Syria in a joint Russian and Syrian operation. According to local sources, 24 men from this town had joined jihadi groups in Syria and Iraq. As a result, Kacanik gained a reputation as the jihadist capital of the Balkans.

On 23rd March 2018, the Basic Court of Pristina liberated the imam of Pristina's Grand Mosque Imam Shefqet Krasniqi. In 2014, he had been arrested together with 11 imams from local Kosovan mosques. In 2016, the Special Prosecution accused him of inciting terrorism by encouraging young Kosovars to go to Syria and Iraq, inciting hatred and tax evasion.^[14]

On 5th September 2017, Pope Francis' special envoy, Cardinal Ernest Simoni, an Albanian, consecrated St Teresa's Roman Catholic Co-Cathedral in Pristina.

Prospects for freedom of religion

The extreme poverty, high unemployment, and influx of money from Saudi Arabia are seriously threatening to convert a European-oriented, tolerant Muslim society into a haven for Islamic extremism.

The self-proclaimed protector of Islam in the Balkans, Turkey's President Erdogan, is becoming increasingly interested in spreading his political and Islamic agenda in Kosovo. Millions of Turkish lira are being used to build dozens of new mosques. Ankara has demanded the revision of the Kosovo history textbooks in order to present Ottoman rule in a more sympathetic light.

Endnotes / Sources

[1] Law no.02/L-31 Official Gazette no. 11, 1st April 2007

[2] New article 4A.4.1 of the Draft Law on Amendment and Supplementation of Law No.02/L -31 on Freedom of Religion

[3] The new Article 4 A.4.2

[4] According to article 7.B.1 of the Draft Law

[5] New Article 7C of the Draft Law

[6] ICMP, Missing Persons From Kosovo Conflict And Its Aftermath, Pristina 2017

[7] Carlotta Gall, How Kosovo Was Turned Into Fertile Ground For ISIS, New York Times, 21st May 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/22/world/europe/how-the-saudis-turned-kosovo-into-fertile-ground-for-isis.html> (accessed 12th May 2018)

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- [13] Kosovo: Imam džamije u Ka?aniku razrešen dužnosti, Ka?anik Mosque Imam Fired, Radio Slobodna Evropa, June 28, 2017, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/28581744.html> (accessed 12th May 2018)
- [14] Labinot Leposhtica, Kosovo Imam Denies Inciting Terror in Sermons, Balkan Insight, 22nd January 2018, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/pristina-s-imam-pleaded-not-guilty-for-inciting-his-followers-to-conflict-zone-01-22-2018> (accessed 12th May 2018)