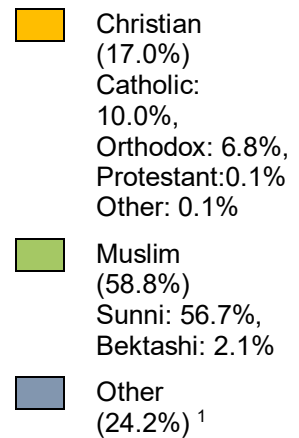
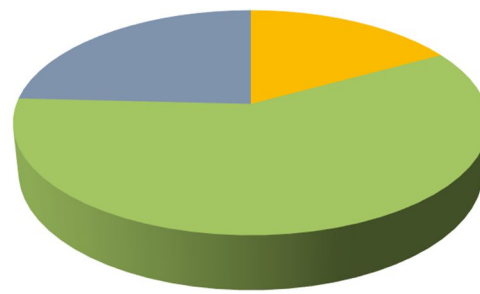


ALBANIA



Area: 28,748 km ²	Population²: 2.82 million	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): Albanian
--	--	---------------------------------------	---------------------------------------

Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

In its present constitution, adopted in October 1998, the Republic of Albania declared itself as a secular state which “observes the freedom of religious beliefs and creates conditions to exercise it”.³ Article 24 confirms that everyone is free to choose or change their religion or belief, and to express these individually or collectively, in public or in private life through religious education, practice or observance. Article 18 prohibits discrimination on religious grounds. Destruction or damage to religious objects, and the prevention of religious ceremonies, are considered as offenses, and are punishable.

The government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups. The State Committee on Cults, which was founded in September 1999 according to a decision of Council Ministers, aims to regulate the relations between the state and religious communities. The Committee maintains records and statistics on foreign religious organisations that contact it for assistance. In addition, religious movements may acquire the official status of a juridical person by registering with the Tirana District Court under the Law on Non-profit Organisations, which recognises the status of a non-profit association regardless of whether the organisation has a cultural, religious or humanitarian character.

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 Baha’is, 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 (VUSH), a Protestant umbrella organisation.

The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools. According to official figures, religious groups are managing 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.

Many claims from religious groups concern the return or restitution of property seized during the former communist period, which remain unresolved. The State Agency for the Restitution and Compensation of Property completed the return of four properties to the Orthodox Church through the restitution process. The Orthodox Church reported that they had claims for 890 buildings and properties still pending, including more than 50 church properties converted to military installations.⁴ The government also restored one property to the Catholic Church, and compensated the Muslim community in Shkoder for one property.

Albania is the only European country to have a Muslim majority. The Albanian Muslims are somewhat different to Muslims in Turkey or Arab countries. Various stricter exponents of Islam view Albania, like the rest of the Balkans, as missionary territory and much Saudi money has been spent in building mosques all over the country.

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 Shi'a Sufism). Bektashi Sufis, with two million followers in Albania, are the only indigenous Shi'a Muslims in Europe (except for some Turkish Shi'as in the small part of Turkey). The Bektashis do not cover women, allow women in Khabes (the equivalent of a 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 apostolic times. The vestiges of many Paleochristian churches, dating back to the first centuries 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 nearly five hundred years of Ottoman rule left deep marks upon the cultural and religious landscape of the Albanian people.

The communist revolution of 1945 marked the beginning of extreme persecution for 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. The religious and intellectual leaders of the Albanian Catholic community were wiped out. Of the seven bishops and 200 priests and sisters in Albania before the communist takeover, only one bishop and 30 priests and sisters were found alive when the communist regime ended. After the fall of Communism, the Catholic Church had to restart its mission almost from scratch. Quite a few new churches have been built and parishes and dioceses established. Seminaries have opened. Pope 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 the 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 and 100 local priests were ordained. The Evangelical community counts around 3,000 members in 160 churches of all denominations, including Baptist, Brethren, and Lutheran.

Relations between Albanian Muslims and Christians have generally been good, as members of a small and culturally-isolated people, have found national unity more important than religious differences. In Tirana, the capital city, Muslims and Christians share a common cemetery. In September 2014, up to 300,000 Christians and Muslims attended a public Mass led by the visiting Pope Francis, who praised the country's religious tolerance.

The majority of Albanians are secular in orientation, after decades of rigidly enforced atheism. Only people over 60, and certain families, have kept the traditions alive. Consequently the young are now targeted by all the religious missions. In cities across the country, new houses of worship stand alongside the dreary, Soviet-style apartment blocks, nearly all built with money from organisations in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, the United States, Greece, Italy and many other

nations. Libya, Egypt, Malaysia and other Muslim countries have paid for hundreds of Albanians to study religion in their countries and return to teach.

About 200 of the 727 mosques in Albania do not operate in accordance with legal standards and the Muslim Community, KMSH, regulation.⁵ According to the mufti of Tirana, Ylli Gurra, up to 150 Albanians have joined Daesh (ISIS) jihadists in Syria.⁶ He blames the Salafist foundations from the Gulf monarchies that poured into the region in the 1990s. In March 2014, 13 people were arrested at two mosques on the outskirts of Tirana, for allegedly recruiting over 70 foreign fighters to join Daesh.⁷

Incidents

There were no incidents recorded during the period under review.

Prospects for freedom of religion

In a country that once officially outlawed Christianity, religion had returned in a different way. The three different religious groups which used to represent traditionally established faiths in Albania attempted to revive religion and reverse the impact of forcibly introduced atheism.

At the same time, new practices and beliefs are being planted by foreign missionaries and money, making this tiny country an example of the globalisation of religion. Various groups of Protestant missionaries and Muslim imams have arrived in large numbers to attract new followers.

There is concern about funding from Muslim extremist groups. Many are worried that foreign influence is introducing conservative or radical thinking in other religions as well, at odds with Albania's history as a moderate, multi-faith society.

Western publicity appears stronger, and has greater influence on the contemporary Albanian citizens. Those attracted by the West are mostly young and educated town-dwellers and intellectuals. One of the advantages enjoyed by the Christian churches is that many Albanians have had to travel to Italy, Germany and Greece in order to work or to study. Today, Albanians, regardless of their religious affiliations, incline mostly towards a full integration of their country within the European Union.

¹ 2011 census

² 2011 census.

³ http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/al00000_.html

⁴ 2014 Report on International Religious Freedom US Department of State

⁵ Head of the State Committee on Cults, Ilir Dizdari, during a conference on the risk of terrorism in Albania 15 Dec 2015. The KMSH is the only Muslim organisation that the state recognises.

⁶ The Economist Jan 23, 2016

⁷ Jamestown Foundation, Ethnic Albanian Foreign Fighters and the Islamic State, 15 May 2015