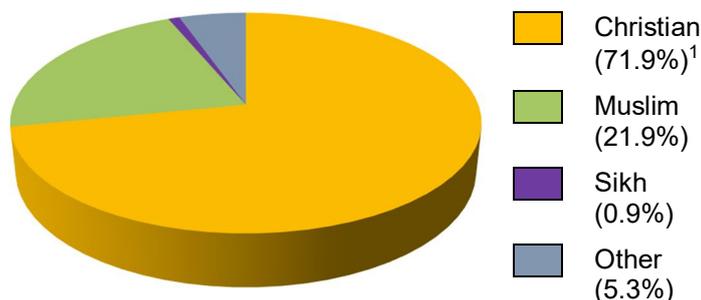
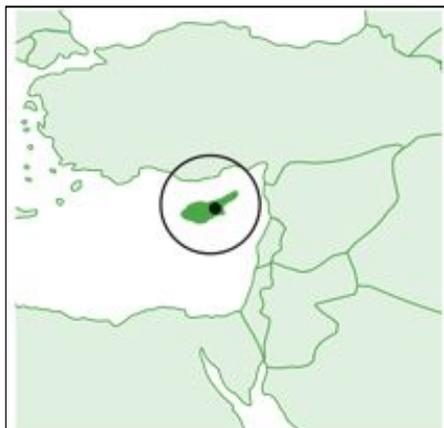


CYPRUS



Area: 9,251 km ²	Population¹: 1,129,000	Political system: Democracy	Major Language(s): Greek, Turkish, Armenian, Cypriot Arabic
---------------------------------------	---	---------------------------------------	--

Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

The 1960 Constitution of the Republic of Cyprus recognises in its Preamble that there are two distinct national, linguistic and religious communities on the island – Greek Orthodox and Turkish Muslim. Article 18 of the Republic of Cyprus's Constitution guarantees freedom of thought, conscience and religion, together with the right to profess and manifest one's own faith in every social context, provided that this does not create obstacles to security, health, public order and other rights enshrined elsewhere in the document. Also specifically authorised is the right to change religion or creed; but forced conversions are prohibited, as are all attempts to obstruct the conversion of others.

The Vakf, a Muslim institution, regulates religious matters for Turkish Cypriots. Like the Greek Orthodox Church of Cyprus, the Vakf is exempted from taxes and free from government interference. The constitution officially recognises three other religious organisations: Maronite Catholics, Armenian Apostolic Christians, and "Latins" (Cypriot Roman Catholics). There is no requirement for other religious groups to register. To act as a legal entity, however, a religious group needs to register as a not-for-profit organisation.

In public primary and secondary schools Greek Orthodox religious education is required for Greek Orthodox students. For all other religious groups, alternative religious courses can be provided at the request of the student's guardians.²

Following a 1974 *coup d'état* the northern part of the island formally proclaimed itself the "Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus" (TRNC) in 1983. The TRNC, which is administered by Turkish Cypriots, is not recognised by any country other than Turkey. TRNC regulations stipulate that Greek Orthodox residents may only hold liturgies or masses conducted by two designated priests at three designated functional churches in the Karpas Peninsula without seeking government permission, and that Maronite residents may only hold liturgies or masses at four designated Maronite churches without seeking permission. For services at places of worship other than these, religious groups must submit applications to the authorities for permission. Permission is also necessary for priests other than those officially designated to conduct services. For Cypriots not resident in the TRNC, eg members of the Greek Orthodox, Maronite Catholic or Armenian Apostolic Churches residing in the government-controlled south, a specific permit is required for services involving lay participation.³

Incidents

It is often difficult to categorise specific incidents as violations of religious freedom, since religion and ethnicity are closely linked in Cyprus. While relations between the leaders of the religious communities are often cordial, there is occasional tension between adherents of the different faiths. The leaders of the main religious groups on the island have continued to meet regularly and to visit places of worship on both sides of the buffer zone. Cooperation between different religious groups has led towards improvements in inter-faith relations.⁴

The increasingly positive situation in Cyprus was set back severely by a decision in May 2016 by TRNC minister Tahsin Ertuğruloğlu restricting Greek Orthodox religious ceremonies at churches in the north to once a year: either on Christmas, Easter or the feast of the Church's patron. The TNRC ministry defended the measure by explaining that it prevented "exploitation of the right" alleging that they have had too many requests for such services and do not have enough police to provide security for all these events. Only the three Greek Orthodox places of worship in the Karpas Peninsula are exempt from this regulation. These restrictions do not affect the Maronite Catholic minority.⁵

The political decision was criticised severely by both Muslim and Christian religious leaders and by UN Special Rapporteur Karima Bennouna. The latter welcomed assurances that the newly introduced curbs would be pared back.⁶ These restrictions are also problematic because many Christian churches in the north are in very poor condition and in desperate need of help. Some only survive through tourism and volunteer priests.⁷

In February 2016 the nineteenth-century mosque in the city of Denia, which was only restored in 2013, was damaged by arsonists. The attack was universally condemned by representatives of all Cypriot religious groups.⁸

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

Some of the recent religious-freedom developments in Cyprus seem very encouraging. Religious leaders engage in broad cooperation, supporting the difficult peace talks in an ethnically divided country. The US Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs, Shaun Casey, claimed that the co-existence of Christians and Muslims on the island can be a model for the region.⁹

This culture of religious tolerance between communities also seems to extend into the wider society. A study compared attitudes towards Muslim immigrants in recent years. While they were largely perceived in the media as a threat in the years 2011-13, there seems to have been a marked shift in attitudes in 2014-15, according to the study. Media portrayals now depict immigrants as human beings in need of help. It remains to be seen how the most recent developments will influence attitudes in society.¹⁰

The May 2016 decision of TNRC authorities to severely restrict the possibility of Christian worship in the north could prove a serious roadblock in the development of the freedom of religion in Cyprus, if it is not revoked. Government-imposed restrictions of access to places of worship in the Turkish Cypriot territories remain a problem.

1 In the 2001 population census some 1.5 percent of the populace identified as Roman Catholic.

¹ Of which 787,000 live in the south.

2 <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dld=238368#wrapper>

3 <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dld=238370#wrapper>

4 <http://in-cyprus.com/religious-pressure-north/>

5 <http://cyprus-mail.com/2016/05/24/turkish-cypriot-side-restricts-orthodox-church-services-north/>

6 <http://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2016-06-02/un-expert-condemns-church-access-limits-in-cyprus-north>

-
- 7 http://www.christiantoday.com/article/why_you_can_only_go_to_church_in_northern_cyprus_once_a_year/86848.htm
 - 8 <http://cyprus-mail.com/2016/03/02/denia-mosque-repaired/>
 - 9 <http://cyprus-mail.com/2016/03/08/cyprus-can-be-a-model-for-religious-coexistence/>
 - 10 <http://cyprus-mail.com/2016/06/06/shift-media-focus-migrants-threat-ucy-study-finds/>