

Religion State Power and Political Change in Albania

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Legally, Albania is a secular country that does not subscribe to any religion and, therefore, practices neutrality in matters regarding beliefs and conscience. However, there is a large and interesting history behind the religious trends in the country, which has been dragging back several centuries. The majority of the religious people in Albania are Muslims, while the rest are mostly Christians. Albanians, however, do not attach much importance and value to religious beliefs, and very few consider religion an important part of life.

Christianity was the first religion that was introduced in Albania but was later replaced by Islam when the country came under the control of the Ottoman Empire. (Elsie) The state rarely interfered with religious matters, and both Christian and Muslim organization ran their institutions as they saw fit. By 1944, around 70% of the Albanians ascribed to Islam, while the rest were Christians. The communist government of Albania came up with drastic land reforms back in 1946 with an aim to reduce private ownership of large farms. It reclaimed most of the land owned by institutions or rich individuals and redistributed it to the poor. Religious institutions were not spared, too, as the government took over their property and nationalized it.

The majority of the people who practiced religion were arrested and detained without fair trial, while others were tortured and killed. The government also expelled all Roman Catholic personnel who were not Albanian in 1946. The communist government also prohibited any religious organization that had affiliate institutions outside the country to operate in Albania. Since it had nationalized education institutions, the government also banned religious institutions from educating the youth. Religious institutions were also banned from owning property and practicing philanthropy, including running hospitals or participating in social welfare projects.

During the early 1960s, the communist government of Albania continued with its crackdown on religion with an aim to totally eradicate religion from the country. (Elsie) In 1967, it started using violence and threats to get rid of religion. Property that was owned by religious institutions, including churches and mosques, were raided and were either closed or turned into warehouses or social amenities like workshops, gyms, or cultural centers for the youth. Religious leaders were humiliated in public while being tortured, others were burned alive, while others had their property taken, and some were killed while others died through starvation. The communist government went ahead to formulate stringent laws against religions and put them in the constitution.

In 1976, the constitution of Albania stated that "The State recognizes no religion, and supports atheistic propaganda in order to implant a scientific materialistic world outlook in the people." The following year, it designed a new penal code that aimed to punish any distribution, production, or

storage of religious propaganda and literature with up to 10 years in prison. Muslims and Christians who had names that were associated with their respective religions were forced to change them and pick new names that would reflect the country's atheistic nature. Anything that contained religious names was to be renamed, including roads, towns, and streets.

The Albanian government was able to repress any official religious practices in the country. However, some staunch believers continued to secretly practice their religion despite the numerous severe risks and resulting consequences. Anyone caught with religious materials, including literature and artifacts, was severely punished with imprisonment for many years. Religious activities such as weddings and baptisms were highly prohibited, and practicing and participating in them attracted the wrath of the state. Parents were reluctant to pass on their religious beliefs to their children, fearing the government would find out. The government went as far as laying traps on religious folks by offering forbidden foods to students and workers and would call out anyone who refused to eat on religious grounds.

In 1987, an intervention by a delegation from Denmark at a United Nations Commission on Human Rights conference in Geneva set the gears of religious liberation in Albania by highlighting the ongoing religious oppression in the country. A change of leadership in the Albanian government and relentless advocacy ensured the ban on religious activities was lifted in 1990, signifying the end of religious oppression.

Religion plays a vital role in politics because it acts as a source of ethics and principles since it is a major social institution. It shapes the behavior of human beings from a young age, and therefore, it is an important tool for modeling ideal citizens and leaders. Religion also plays the role of an overseer, ensuring there is political accountability. It prevents the government from abusing its powers since it acts as a check and balance mechanism. Additionally, religion acts as the voice of the people. It represents the views of many people who would be otherwise unheard of. Religion is also an important educational tool for the masses because of its wide reach and the authority it commands.

Work Cited

Elsie, Robert. *A Dictionary Of Albanian Religion, Mythology, And Folk Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2001. Print.