

Thank you Madam President.

My name is Arben Sulejmani. I am the official representative of the Bektashi Community, a religious minority in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and a member of the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), an international organization of over 70 member associations of religious and faith based organizations working for freedom of religion or beliefs in over 30 countries.



My intervention on this agenda item focuses on acts of aggression or violence against the Bektashi community, including intimidation, specifically in our places of worship and assembly. We are urging the government to protect and guarantee our right to property like any of the religious groups in our country so that we can freely practice our religion and culture in community with other members of our community.

Non-Recognition

In Macedonia, there is no official state religion; however, a 2001 constitutional amendment specifically lists five religious groups: the MOC-OA, the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM), the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and the Evangelical Methodist Church.

The 2007 Law on the Legal Status of a Church, a Religious Community and a Religious Group allows for the legal registration of other religious groups, however, despite our applications for registration, our group has been denied legal recognition due to the prior use of the Bektashi title by a separate group, and based on the Supreme Court's decision that the teachings of the Bektashi have similarities to the Islamic Community of Macedonia (ICM).

No less than the former Special Rapporteur of Freedom of Religion and Belief, Asma Jahangir, on her Mission to the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in 2009 recognized the resulting tensions and friction between different Muslim groups in the country.

Property Rights

The inability of our religious community to obtain legal recognition has inhibited restitution and denationalisation of our religious site in Tetovo, which is currently occupied by the ICM, limiting our community's ability to worship. Further, there have been acts of violence perpetrated against our site of worship, in the form of vandalism and other acts of intimidation. Our community has also experienced harassment and threats from individuals with differing interpretations of Islam. As result, members of our community are experiencing a state of fear and thus, unable to manifest and practice our fundamental right to religion.

Recommendations

On behalf of the IARF, I would like to provide the following recommendations:

Firstly, we would like to urge our government to recognise all religious minorities under its national legal regime to ensure the realization of the fundamental right to freedom of religion or beliefs, including the restitution of property, in the case of our community.

Secondly, that the right of religious minorities be protected when they do not self-recognize with a majority religious group, in order to protect them from all forms of discrimination or intolerance on the grounds of religion. That the violations committed to religious minorities be investigated and acted upon by relevant government authorities without delay.

Finally, the IARF would like to re-emphasize the finding by the former Special Rapporteur in 2009 concerning the 2007 Law on the Legal Status of a Church, a Religious Community and a Religious Group, that this law must be streamlined, for example with regard to registration issues in order to help prevent small religious communities from facing obstacles in practice in access to and use of their places of worship.