04/06/2020

Montenegro Accused of Violating Soldiers' Rights Over Protest Ban



Ombudsperson says the Montenegrin army is violating people's rights to peaceful assembly by banning officers and soldiers from joining Serbian Orthodox Church protests.

Montenegro's Ombudsperson has accused the armed forces of violating people's rights to peaceful assembly by banning army officers and soldiers from participating in protests held on behalf of the Serbian Orthodox Church. On Wednesday, Sinisa Bjekovic said freedom of speech and religion was a constitutional right. "Participation in Church protests can only be banned if officers or soldiers wear [military] uniform during the protests," Bjekovic said.

On March 11, the Defence Ministry suspended an army officer for joining the protests over the new religion law that the Serbian Church – the largest faith group in the country – says could strip it of its property.

It said Darko Mrvaljevic had broken the law. On February 20, army chief General Dragutin Dakic warned that any soldiers taking part in the protests risked being forced out, as there was no place in the military for those who place the Church

above the law.

General Dakic said soldiers had a duty to defend the state in accordance with its laws and the constitution and cannot take part in political manifestations.

On TV station Vijesti, the general stressed that it was especially unacceptable for officers to participate in protests with visible political implications and where the flags of another state, referencing Serbia, were on display.

In response to the Ombudsperson, the Ministry of Defence stood by its ban, saying the protests were political and off-limits for army personnel.

“There were political messages and members of political parties at the protests. They publicly insulted people who declared themselves as Montenegrins and the state of Montenegro,” the ministry said.

From December to March this year, tens of thousands of Serbian Orthodox Church clergy, believers and supporters held protests twice a week demanding the withdrawal of the law that the country’s parliament passed in December 2019. Protests paused during the coronavirus pandemic.

The disputed law mandates the creation of a list of religious sites in the country, and says faith groups that cannot prove their rights to these properties risk having them taking into public ownership.

The Serbian Orthodox Church, whose relations with the government are poor, claims the list could be used to strip it of its assets. Opposition pro-Russian and pro-Serbian political movements have been regular participants at the rallies and marches.

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