

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 22, 2010 at 4:30pm

Bosnian church challenges government order

by Jonathan Luxmoore by Catholic News Service

WARSAW, Poland -- The cardinal of Bosnia-Herzegovina said a local government order that he must move from his residence so it could be turned over to a former communist secret police agent would take effect only "over my dead body."

Challenging the order by the Sarajevo City Council, Cardinal Vinko Puljic of Sarajevo and Bosnian church officials called upon the country's Muslim-dominated government to correct "legalized injustices." They said the order stems from a 1984 communist-era law which no longer has force.

"This building was always church property. It was never nationalized or taken over by the state," said Msgr. Ivo Tomasevic, spokesman for the Catholic bishops' conference of Bosnia-Herzegovina. "It's (the decision) just one of many legalized injustices which have enabled the majority in power here to make problems for minorities like us."

The government ruled that the former agent, a woman, was the legal occupier of the cardinal's residence, which was confiscated and used for anti-Catholic operations under communist rule in the former Yugoslavia.

In a Dec. 21 interview with Catholic News Service, Msgr. Tomasevic said the unnamed woman, whose late husband also worked with the police, was living in Canada and wished to profit from the property rather than live there.

He added that the woman's lawyer had promised an "amicable solution," but said no solution had been offered during mid-December government talks on the issue.

"Although this dispute has gained the most publicity, there are many other similar cases in which people have been denied their property entitlements because of this unjust law," he said.

In its Nov. 17 ruling, the government said Cardinal Puljic's late-19th century palace, which was taken over under the rule of Yugoslavia's communist strongman, Josip Tito, could remain in use by the ex-agent, who fled during the Bosnian war between 1992 and 1995. Bugging and surveillance equipment in the cardinal's bedroom and other parts of the building were left behind.

The judgment was angrily condemned as a "blatant violation of law and order" by the 65-year-old cardinal, who said it was "another sign" that Catholics were "treated as second category citizens" in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Muslim chairman of Bosnia-Herzegovina's Inter-Religious Council, Mufti Husejin Smajic, said he regretted the ruling, adding that he was shocked that Bosnian authorities were "seeking to drive out such a distinguished religious and moral authority as Cardinal Puljic."

Bosnia-Herzegovina's Catholic population has dwindled since the start of hostilities in 1992 that led to the country's independence. Before the four-year conflict, Catholics made up 18 percent of the country's population of 4.3 million. Today, the Catholic population is less than half that number.

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