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Armenia

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the law places some restrictions on the religious freedom of adherents of minority faiths, and there were some restrictions in practice. The Armenian Apostolic Church, which has formal legal status as the national church, enjoys some privileges not available to adherents of other religious groups.

There was no overall change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. According to legislation passed in 2003, the Law on Alternative Military Service took effect on June 1, 2004, and the Government allowed subsequent draftees and conscientious objectors currently in prison to apply for an alternative to military service. The law provides "conscientious objectors" the opportunity to serve in either noncombat military or civil service duties instead of as conscripted military personnel, subject to government panel approval. In October 2004, the Government granted the Jehovah's Witnesses formal registration as a religious organization. Some denominations report occasional acts of discrimination by mid- or low-level government officials.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, societal attitudes toward some minority religious groups are ambivalent.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 18,520 square miles, and its population is approximately 3 million.

The country is ethnically homogeneous, with approximately 98 percent of the population classified as ethnic Armenian. Many Azeris left Armenia during the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh from 1988 to 1994, increasing the country's religious and ethnic homogeneity. Approximately 90 percent of citizens nominally belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, an Eastern Christian denomination whose spiritual center is located at the cathedral and monastery of Etchmiadzin. The head of the Church, Catholicos Garegin II (alternate spelling Karekin), was elected in 1999 at Etchmiadzin with the participation of Armenian delegates from around the world. Religious observance was strongly discouraged in the Soviet era, leading to a sharp decline in the number of active churches and priests, the closure of virtually all monasteries, and the nearly complete absence of religious education. As a result, the number of active religious practitioners is relatively low. For many citizens, Christian identity is an ethnic trait, with only a loose connection to religious belief.

There are comparatively small, but growing, communities of other faiths. There was no reliable system in place for compiling accurate census data on religious minorities and reports from congregants themselves varied significantly. The Government does not provide official figures for religious adherents, but congregants offered the following unconfirmed estimates: Catholic, both Roman and Mekhitarist (Armenian Uniate) (180,000); Yezidi, an ethnically Kurdish cultural group whose religion includes elements derived from Zoroastrianism, Islam, and animism (40,000 nominal adherents); unspecified "charismatic" Christian (22,700); Jehovah's Witnesses (8,500); Armenian Evangelical Church (5,000); Baptist (2,000); the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (2,000); Greek Orthodox (1,200); Seventh-day Adventist (950); Pentecostal (700); Jewish (500 to 1,000), and Baha'i (more than 200).

There are no estimates of the number of atheists in the country. Yezidis are concentrated primarily in agricultural areas around Mount Aragats, northwest of the capital, Yerevan. Armenian Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christians are concentrated in the northern region, while most Jews, Mormons, and Baha'i are located in Yerevan. In Yerevan, there is a small community of Muslims, including Kurds, Iranians, and temporary residents from the Middle East.

Several minority religious groups sponsor missionary programs in the country, including both expatriate and local participants. Jehovah's Witnesses estimated an increase in membership of approximately 1,000 adherents, while membership in all other minority religions remained relatively unchanged.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the law specifies some restrictions on the religious freedom of adherents of faiths other than the Armenian Apostolic Church. The Constitution also provides for freedom of conscience, including the right either to believe or to adhere to atheism. The 1991 Law on Freedom of Conscience, amended in 1997, establishes the separation of church and state but grants the Armenian Apostolic Church official status as the national church.

Extended negotiations between the Government and the Armenian Apostolic Church resulted in a 2000 memorandum providing a framework for the two sides to negotiate a concordat. Although they have not yet concluded negotiations, the Government and the Armenian Apostolic Church used the memorandum as a basis for dispute resolution, resulting in the return of several monasteries to church control and several policy agreements.

The law requires all religious denominations and organizations to register to operate without restrictions. The Department of Religious Affairs and National Minorities, which replaced the former Council on Religious Affairs (CRA), oversees religious affairs and coordinates activities with the cabinet's Chief of Staff. A high-ranking official from the former CRA serves as the Prime Minister's Advisor on Religious Affairs. The Office of the State Registrar registers religious entities, and the Department of Religious Affairs and National Minorities performs a consultative role in the registration process. To qualify for registration, petitioning organizations must "be free from materialism and of a purely spiritual nature," and must subscribe to a doctrine based on "historically recognized holy scriptures." A religious organization must have at least 200 adult members. Religious groups are not required to register, but unregistered religious organizations may not publish newspapers or magazines, rent meeting places, broadcast programs on television or radio, or officially sponsor the visas of visitors. By the end of the period covered by this report, the Government had registered 56 religious organizations, some of which are individual congregations from within the same denomination.

Yerevan's one surviving 18th century mosque, which was restored with Iranian funding, is open for regular Friday prayers. The Government does not create any obstacles for Muslims to pray there, despite the fact that the mosque is not officially registered as a religious facility.

The law permits religious education in state schools. Only personnel authorized and trained by the Government may teach in schools. The history of the Armenian Apostolic Church forms the basis of this curriculum; many schools cover global religions in elementary school and the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church in middle school. Students may choose not to attend religious education classes. Religious groups are not allowed to provide religious instruction in schools, although registered groups may do so in private homes to children of their members. On occasion, priests from the Armenian Apostolic Church teach classes in religious history; however, the use of public school buildings for religious "indoctrination" is illegal.

The Government's Human Rights Ombudsman and the head of the Department of Religious Affairs and National Minorities met with many religious minority organizations during the period covered by this report.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

During the period covered by this report, most registered religious groups reported no serious legal impediments to their activities. However, the 1991 law prohibits "proselytizing" (undefined in the law) and restricts unregistered groups from publishing, broadcasting, or inviting official visitors to the country. The prohibition on proselytizing applies to all groups, including the Armenian Apostolic Church; however, the term used for proselytizing implies that someone has been taken away from a "true" faith and the prohibition effectively restricts only minority religious groups.

In October 2004, the Government registered the Jehovah's Witnesses, following many previous unsuccessful attempts. Both government representatives and group leaders expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the registration process. In the past, members of the Jehovah's Witnesses were allowed to bring in small quantities of printed materials for their own use. Registration allows the group to import large quantities of material.

According to the head of the Department of Religious Affairs and National Minorities, some minority religious groups including the Molokans and some Yezidi groups, which might number in the hundreds, have not sought registration.

Although the law prohibits foreign funding for foreign-based churches, the Government has not enforced this ban and considers it unenforceable. A 1991 law required all religious organizations, except the Armenian Apostolic Church, to obtain prior permission to engage in public religious activities, travel abroad, or invite foreign guests to the country. This law was reversed by Presidential Order in 2001 and, in practice, no travel restrictions were imposed on any religious denomination.

No action has been taken against missionaries. Religious groups did not report any investigations of missionaries during the period covered by this report.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Law on Alternative Military Service took effect on June 1 and was applied to subsequent draftees and those currently serving prison terms for draft evasion. According to Jehovah's Witnesses leaders in Yerevan, 14 members of their religious group remained in prison for their refusal of military service on conscientious and religious grounds. Representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses stated that all of the prisoners had been given the opportunity to serve an alternative to military service rather than prison time, but that all refused because alternative service was administered under the control of the military. Six of those currently in prison reportedly received the maximum sentence of 2 years.

There are reports that hazing of new conscripts is more severe for minority groups such as the Yezidis and Jehovah's Witnesses. There was one report that a new recruit loosely affiliated with the Jehovah's Witnesses was struck by an officer after he claimed conscientious objection to military service. The recruit's representative said he was protected from physical harm by his commanding officer, but he eventually deserted.

Other than Jehovah's Witnesses who were conscientious objectors, there were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, societal attitudes toward some minority religions are ambivalent.

The Armenian Apostolic Church is a member of the World Council of Churches and, despite doctrinal differences, has friendly official relations with major Christian denominations, including the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, and some Protestant churches.

Suppressed through 70 years of Soviet rule, the Armenian Apostolic Church has trained priests and committed material resources to fill immediately the spiritual void created by the demise of Communist ideology. Nontraditional religious organizations are viewed with suspicion. Representatives of foreign-based denominations frequently cited statements including "one God, one country, one church," noting they had been warned against "stealing souls" from the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Societal attitudes toward most minority religions are ambivalent. Many citizens are not religiously observant, but the link between religion and Armenian ethnicity is strong.

According to some observers, the general population expressed negative attitudes about Jehovah's Witnesses, because they refused to serve in the military, engaged in little understood proselytizing practices, and because of a widespread but unsubstantiated belief that they pay the desperately poor to convert. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to be targets of hostile sermons by some Armenian Apostolic Church clerics and experienced occasional societal discrimination. The press reported a number of complaints lodged by citizens against members of Jehovah's Witnesses for allegedly illegal proselytizing.

There was no officially sponsored violence reported against minority religious groups during the period covered by this report. Yezidi children on occasion reported hazing by teachers and classmates. Some

observers reported increasingly unfavorable attitudes toward members of Jehovah's Witnesses among the general population because they are seen as "unpatriotic" for refusing military service. Unlike in previous years, the local arm of the Jehovah's Witnesses reported no violence against their community.

The Jewish community reported incidents of verbal harassment during the period covered by this report, but members noted that the frequency of incidents decreased from previous years. Following his calls for the country to be "purified" of Jews and Yezidis, the leader of the Union of Armenian Aryans, a small, ultranationalist group, was arrested on charges of "public incitement to national, racial, and religious hostility," and subsequently convicted. In March 2005, a court issued a 3-year suspended sentence. The director of ALM TV frequently made anti-Semitic remarks on the air.

In May, Jewish groups complained to government authorities about the distribution of anti-Semitic literature. Authorities said the imported literature apparently violated the Law on Distributing Literature Inflaming National Hatred and recommended that the groups file a complaint with the Prosecutor General's office. However, neither police nor Jewish groups were able to identify the importers, and Jewish leaders had not taken any formal action by year's end.

On September 17, 2004, offices of the Jewish community in Yerevan received a message that vandals had damaged the local memorial to the victims of the Holocaust. Several photographs of the memorial were taken, and the vandalism was reported immediately to the local police, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and the government-owned television channel. A television crew arrived at the site together with an official from the Jewish community in Yerevan and discovered that the memorial had been wiped clean, apparently by the park guard. There was no further investigation into the incident.

Some Yezidi leaders reported that police and local authorities subjected their religious community to discrimination. Other Yezidi leaders denied the allegations.

Although it is difficult to document, there is some informal societal discrimination in employment against members of certain minority religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Ambassador and Embassy officials maintain close contact with the Catholicos at Etchmiadzin and with leaders of other major religious and ecumenical groups in the country. During the period covered by this report, U.S. officials consistently raised the issue of alternatives to military service and registration of the Jehovah's Witnesses with government officials. The Embassy also maintains regular contact with traveling regional representatives of foreign-based religious groups such as the Mormons and raises their concerns with the Government. Embassy officials closely monitor trials related to issues of religious freedom and take an active role in policy forums and nongovernmental organization roundtables regarding religious freedom.

The U.S. Embassy hosted several roundtable meetings and receptions in honor of U.S. representatives of religious organizations. Leaders of local minority religious groups were regularly welcomed at these events.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51538.htm)