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Armenia

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

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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 religious groups.

The Government generally did not enforce existing legal restrictions on religious freedom. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to report that judges sentenced them to longer prison terms for evasion of alternative service than in the past, although the sentences were within the range allowed by law.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 11,500 square miles and a population of 3.2 million. Approximately 98 percent of the population is ethnic Armenian. The link between Armenian ethnicity and the Armenian Church is strong. An estimated 90 percent of citizens nominally belong to the Armenian Church, one of six ancient autocephalous Eastern churches with its spiritual center (Mother See) located at the Etchmiadzin cathedral and monastery near the capital of Yerevan.

There are small communities of other religious groups. There was no reliable census data on religious minorities, and estimates from congregants varied significantly. These groups constitute less than 5 percent of the population and include Roman Catholics, Armenian Uniate (Mekhitarist) Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Armenian Evangelical Christians, Molokans, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, various groups of charismatic Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Yezidis (non-Muslim Kurds who practice Yezidism), Jews, Sunni Muslim Kurds, Shi'ite Muslims, Baha'is, and others.

Yezidis are concentrated primarily in agricultural areas around Mount Aragats, northwest of Yerevan. Armenian Catholics live mainly in the north, while most Jews, Mormons, Baha'is, and Orthodox Christians reside in Yerevan, along with a small community of mostly Shi'ite Muslims, including Iranians, and temporary residents from the Middle East.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and the right to practice, choose, or change religious belief. Nevertheless, it recognizes "the exclusive mission of the Armenian Church as a national church in the spiritual life, development of the national culture, and preservation of the national identity of the people of Armenia." The Constitution and the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations establish the separation of church and state but grant the Armenian Church official status as the national church.

The April 2007 Law on the Relations of the Republic of Armenia and the Armenian Church regulates the special relations between the state and the Armenian Church and grants certain privileges to the Armenian Church that are not available to other religious groups. It makes the Armenian Church's marriage rite legally binding, but the supporting legal acts to enforce this were not in place at the end of the period covered by this report. The law also allows the Armenian Church to have permanent representatives in hospitals, orphanages, boarding schools, military units, and all places of detentions, while the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations permits other religious organizations to have representatives in these places on demand only. In general, the Law on the Relations of the Republic of Armenia and the Armenian Church formally recognizes the moral as well as ethnic role that the Armenian Church plays in society, as most citizens see it as an integral part of national identity, history, and cultural heritage.

The Government observes January 6, the day on which the Armenian Church celebrates Christmas, as a national holiday.

The law does not mandate registration of nongovernmental organizations, including religious groups; however, only registered organizations have legal status. Only registered groups may publish more than one thousand copies of newspapers or magazines, rent meeting places, broadcast programs on television or radio, or officially sponsor the visas of visitors, although there is no prohibition on individual members doing so. To qualify for registration, religious organizations must "be free from materialism and of a purely spiritual nature," have at least 200 adult members, and subscribe to a doctrine based on "historically recognized holy scriptures." The registration requirements do not refer to the religious organizations of national minorities. The Office of the State Registrar registers religious entities. The Department of Religious Affairs and National Minorities oversees religious affairs and performs a consultative role in the registration process. There were no reports of the Government refusing registration to religious groups that qualified for registration under the law.

The Law on Alternative Service allows conscientious objectors--subject to government panel approval--to perform either noncombatant military or labor service duties rather than serve as combat-trained military personnel. The law took effect in 2004 and applies to subsequent draftees and those serving prison terms for draft evasion. A January 2006 amendment to the Criminal Code criminalizes evasion of alternative labor service. However, conscientious objectors continued to maintain that military control of the alternative labor service amounted to unacceptable military service.

The Law on Education mandates that public schools offer a secular education. Only personnel authorized and trained by the Government may teach in public schools. Classes in religious history are part of the public school curriculum and are taught by public school teachers. The history of the Armenian Church is the basis of this curriculum; many schools teach about world religions in elementary school and the history of the Armenian Church in middle school. All religious organizations may establish groups for religious instruction to train their members, utilizing facilities belonging to or set aside for them. The law grants the Armenian Church the right to organize voluntary religious classes in state education institutions using the facilities and resources of those institutions.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally did not enforce existing legal restrictions on religious freedom. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations prohibits but does not define "proselytizing." The prohibition applies to all groups, including the Armenian Church. Most registered religious groups reported no significant legal impediments to their activities during the reporting period.

Although the law prohibits foreign funding of foreign-based denominations, the Government did not enforce the ban.

In May and June 2008, the progovernment *Hayots Ashkhar* and *Golos Armenii* daily newspapers published anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic accusations against former president and current opposition leader Levon Ter-Petrosian. Local observers viewed the inflammatory articles as attempts to portray the opposition leader as a traitor to the country and stir up anti-Semitic sentiment in a country traditionally known for its welcoming attitude toward Jews.

On June 1, 2008, the state-operated H1 public television channel broadcast a 10-minute segment on its weekly *360 Degrees* news magazine program, the sole focus of which appeared to be to disparage and undermine the opposition. The footage incorporated the anti-Semitic and anti-Masonic attacks by *Hayots Ashkhar* and *Golos Armenii*.

On February 27, 2008, H1's news program presented coverage of a post-presidential election opposition rally, focusing primarily on an Israeli flag--one of many nations' flags in the crowd--with the intention of vilifying Ter-Petrosian, whose wife is Jewish.

On May 15, 2008, a judge from Yerevan's Shengavit community general jurisdiction court invalidated the decision of the Guardianship Board of Yerevan Davitashen community recommending that a member of Jehovah's Witnesses be deprived of her parental rights because of her religious affiliation.

In April 2008 Jehovah's Witnesses cleared shipments of religious literature that in March 2007 customs officials had evaluated at a significantly higher rate than the group expected by paying the full price and took their case to the administrative court. At the end of the reporting period, the court had not made a decision.

Conscientious objectors continued to face problems in obtaining necessary documents from the military commissariat.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Jehovah's Witnesses complained that, compared with the prior reporting period, the courts continued to hand down longer sentences for evasion of alternative service. Between July 1, 2007, and June 30, 2008, of the 36 Jehovah's Witnesses sentenced, 19 received 30-month sentences and 3 received 36-month sentences, the maximum allowed by law. The remaining 14 received prison terms ranging between 22 and 27 months.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses leaders in Yerevan, at the end of the reporting period, 78 of their members remained in prison for refusal to perform military service or alternative labor service on conscientious and religious grounds. Representatives of 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 had refused because the military continued to retain administrative control over the alternative service.

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

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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Societal attitudes toward most minority religious groups were ambivalent. While many citizens are not religiously observant, the link between Armenian ethnicity and the Armenian Church is strong.

According to some observers, the general population expressed negative attitudes about minority religious groups, especially Jehovah's Witnesses, because of the latter's refusal to serve in the military, the group's little-understood proselytizing practices, and a widespread but unsubstantiated belief that Jehovah's Witnesses pay the desperately poor to convert. Minority religious groups at times continued to be targets of hostile sermons by Armenian Church clerics, and members of minority religious groups experienced societal discrimination and intolerance.

On May 5, 2008, a member of Jehovah's Witnesses filed a complaint with the police, claiming that a man assaulted her and a fellow member when she offered to engage him in Bible study. By the end of the reporting period, the police had not acted on the complaint.

On February 21, 2008, Jehovah's Witnesses reported that an alleged Armenian Apostolic priest, Nver Melkonyan, physically assaulted a member of their group in Sisian after the member offered to engage in Bible study with him. The member of Jehovah's Witnesses who was attacked complained to the police, Prosecutor General, and Ombudsman, requesting that the Government prosecute the assailant. The police refused to initiate a criminal case, since Melkonyan refuted the assault. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that in July 2007 Melkonyan had on different occasions attacked two other Jehovah's Witnesses, who did not file official complaints. The Armenian Church denied that Melkonyan had any clerical affiliation with it.

On July 31, 2007, in Yerevan, an off-duty police major and his brother allegedly beat a man who was a member of Jehovah's Witnesses. The man and his wife, who was a witness to the attack, filed complaints with the police, Prosecutor's Office, and human rights defender. The police reportedly closed the case due to lack of evidence.

Throughout the reporting period, a group called One Nation Party placed posters in Yerevan that denounced Jehovah's Witnesses and called upon persons to be aware of sects.

In the days prior to the February 2008 presidential election, an anonymous antiopposition organization distributed a digital video disk in Yerevan that used anti-Semitic claims, epithets, and innuendo against Ter-Petrosian, the leading opposition candidate. The allegations cast aspersions on the candidate's Jewish wife and alleged that the candidate was collaborating with the Israeli Government and others in a "Zionist plot" to undermine the state. Some of the contents of the digital video disk were shown on a private television channel that has a national viewing audience.

On December 17, 2007, Jewish community members discovered a small swastika drawn on the Hebrew side of the 14-month-old Joint Tragedies Memorial. The Jewish community dismissed the incident as a random act.

Media outlets continued to label religious groups other than the Armenian Church as "sects" in their broadcasting and transmitted negative programs about them. Various television stations broadcast discussions in which representatives of the Armenian Church and/or other participants labeled religious minority groups as enemies of the state and national unity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. During the period covered by this report, the U.S. Government emphasized to authorities that continued eligibility for the Millennium Challenge Compact remained contingent upon the Government's performance in meeting good governance indicators, which include standards of respect for religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officials maintained close contact with the Catholicos (primate of the Armenian Church) at Etchmiadzin and with leaders of other religious and ecumenical groups in the country. The Embassy maintained regular contact with resident and visiting regional representatives of foreign-based religious groups and raised their concerns with the Government when necessary. U.S. officials also publicly condemned, and urged the Government to promptly end, the anti-Semitic attacks on Ter-Petrossian and his wife by the state-run H1 public television channel.

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