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[Countries & Regions](#) | [International Topics & Issues](#) | [History, Education & Culture](#)
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Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, local authorities sometimes restricted the rights of members of nontraditional religious minority groups.

There was a deterioration in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Local police and security officials at times harassed nontraditional religious minority groups and were complicit or failed to respond to attacks by Orthodox extremists against Jehovah's Witnesses and other nontraditional religious minorities.

Citizens generally do not interfere with traditional religious groups; however, there is growing suspicion of nontraditional religious groups, and an increased number of incidents in which Orthodox extremists harassed and attacked such groups, especially Jehovah's Witnesses occurred.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The U.S. Government has raised its concerns about harassment of and attacks against nontraditional religious minorities with senior government officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of approximately 25,900 square miles and its population is 5 million.

Most ethnic Georgians (approximately 70 percent of the population of 5 million, according to the 1989 census nominally associate themselves with the Georgian Orthodox Church. Orthodox churches serving other non-Georgian ethnic groups, such as Russians and Greeks, are subordinate to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Non-Georgian Orthodox Churches generally use the language of their communicants. In addition, there are a small number of mostly ethnic Russian believers from two dissident Orthodox schools: the Malakani Storoveriy (Old Believers); and Dukhoboriy, the majority of whom have left the country. Under Soviet rule, the number of active churches and priests declined sharply and religious education was nearly nonexistent. Membership in the Georgian Orthodox Church has continued to increase since independence in 1991. The church maintains 4 theological seminaries, 2 academies, several schools, and 27 church dioceses; and has 700 priests, 250 monks, and 150 nuns. The Church is headed by a Catholicos Patriarch, Ilya II, whose See is in Tbilisi.

Several religions, including the Armenian Apostolic Church, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam, traditionally have coexisted with Georgian Orthodoxy. A large number of Armenians live in the southern Javakheti region, in which they constitute a majority of the population. Islam is prevalent among Azerbaijani and north Caucasus ethnic communities in the eastern part of the country and also is found in the regions of Ajara and Abkhazia. About 5 percent of the population are nominally Muslim. Judaism, which has been present since ancient times, is practiced in a number of communities throughout the country, especially in the largest cities of Tbilisi and Kutaisi. Approximately 8,000 Jews remain in the country, following 2 large waves of emigration, the first in the early 1970's and the second in the period of perestroika during the late 1980's. Before then, Jewish officials estimate, there were as many as 100,000 Jews in the country. There also are small numbers of Lutheran worshipers, mostly among descendents of German communities that first settled in the country several hundred years ago. A small number of Kurdish Yezidis have lived in the country for centuries.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Protestant denominations have become more prominent. They include Baptists (composed of Russian, Georgian, Armenian, Ossetian, and Kurdish groups); Seventh-Day Adventists; Pentecostals (both Georgian and Russian); Jehovah's Witnesses (local representatives state that the group has been in the country since 1953 and has about 15,000 adherents); the New Apostolic Church; and the Assemblies of God. There also are a few Baha'is and Hare Krishnas. There are no available

membership numbers for these groups but, combined, their membership most likely totals fewer than 100,000 persons.

Section II. Status of Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, local police and security officials at times harassed nontraditional religious minority groups and their foreign missionaries. The Constitution recognizes the special role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the country's history, but also stipulates the independence of the Church from the State.

There are no laws regarding the registration of religious organizations. Religious groups that perform humanitarian services may be registered as charitable organizations, although religious and other organizations may perform humanitarian services without registration. Organizations that are not registered may not rent office space or import literature, among other activities. Individual members of unregistered organizations may engage in these activities as individuals, but in such cases are exposed to personal legal liability.

While the National Security Council's human rights representative, the chairwoman of the Parliamentary Human Rights Committee, and the Government Ombudsman have been effective advocates for religious freedom in a number of instances, the Ministry of Interior (including the police) and Procuracy generally have failed to pursue criminal cases against Orthodox extremists for their attacks against religious minorities. On the few occasions in which investigations into such attacks have been opened, they have proceeded very slowly.

During the Soviet era, the Georgian Orthodox Church largely was suppressed, as were many other religious institutions; many churches were destroyed or turned into museums, concert halls, and other secular establishments. As a result of new policies regarding religion implemented by the Soviet Government in the late 1980's, the present Patriarch began reconsecrating churches formerly closed throughout the country. The Church remains very active in the restoration of these religious facilities and lobbies the Government for the return of properties that were held by the Church before the Bolshevik Revolution. (Church authorities have claimed that 20 to 30 percent of the land at one time belonged to the Church.)

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Georgian Orthodox Church enjoys a tax-exempt status not available to other religious groups. On March 30, 2001, Parliament amended the Constitution to allow for ultimate adoption of a concordat between the Church and the State, supported by the Church, which would define relations between the two. While a final concordat draft had not been completed by mid-2001, earlier versions covered several controversial topics, including transfer to the Church of ownership of church treasures expropriated during the Soviet period and currently held in state museums and repositories; government compensation to the Church for moral and material damage inflicted by the Soviets; and government assistance in establishing after-school Orthodox religious courses in educational institutions and Orthodox chaplaincies in the military and in prisons. The prospect of such a concordat has raised concerns among nongovernmental organizations (NGO's) that believe that it would discriminate against religious minorities. However, parliamentary leaders, have indicated that prior to adoption, the final concordat draft will be sent to the Council of Europe, European Parliament, and European Union for informal expert analysis, to ensure that it accords with European norms and the country's international legal obligations.

While most citizens practice their religion without restriction, the worship of some citizens, particularly members of non-traditional faiths, has been restricted by intimidation and the use of force by right-wing nationalists whom the Government has failed to control. In addition, a February 22, 2001, Supreme Court ruling upheld a lower court decision revoking the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses on the grounds that the law does not allow for registration of religious organizations. The effect of the Court decision likely will deprive Jehovah's Witnesses of the ability to rent premises for services and importing literature.

Some nationalist politicians continue to use the issue of the continued supremacy of the Georgian Orthodox Church in their platforms, and criticized some Protestant groups, especially evangelical groups, as subversive. Jehovah's Witnesses in particular are the target of attacks from such politicians.

The revocation of the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses resulted from a 1999 court case brought by a nationalist parliamentarian seeking to ban the group on the grounds that it presented a threat to the State and the Georgian Orthodox Church. A February 22, 2001, Supreme Court ruling upheld a June 2000, Appeals Court ruling revoking the Jehovah's Witnesses' legal registration. While the Supreme Court emphasized that its ruling was based on technical legal grounds and was not to have the effect of banning Jehovah's Witnesses, many local law enforcement officials interpreted the ruling as a ban, and thus used it as a justification not to protect Jehovah's Witnesses from attacks by religious extremists. However, the court decision did not have the effect of revoking the registration of other religious organizations, since the case

was brought against Jehovah's Witnesses only.

In December 1999, Jehovah's Witnesses requested permission from the city of Tbilisi to use a municipal sports palace in July 2000 for a convention. In April 2000, the city denied permission. In conversations with group leaders, city officials claimed that the decision was based on concern for the safety of the attendees. Jehovah's Witnesses appealed this decision. The group speculates that the city denied permission due to fear of pressure from the Orthodox Church. The city has not responded to their appeal.

The Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches have been unable to secure the return of their churches and other facilities closed during the Soviet period, many of which later were given to the Georgian Orthodox Church by the State. A prominent Armenian church in Tbilisi remains closed and the Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches, as with Protestant denominations, have had difficulty obtaining permission to construct new churches, reportedly in part as a result of pressure from the Georgian Orthodox Church.

The Jewish community also experienced delays in the return of property confiscated during Soviet rule. In 1997 the courts ordered that a former synagogue which had been rented from the Government by a theater group be returned to the Jewish community. The theater group refused to comply and began a publicity campaign with anti-Semitic overtones to justify its continued occupation of the building. In December 1998, President Shevardnadze promised Jewish leaders that the synagogue would be returned before the 2,600-year celebration of Jewish settlement in the country. However, the President's order was not enforced, and the theater group brought suit, claiming that the building was never a synagogue. The court referred the issue to a panel of experts for evaluation. In May 2000, the panel informed the court that it had come to a split decision on whether the building had been a synagogue. On April 10, 2001, the Supreme Court ruled that the central hall of the synagogue should be returned to the Jewish community, but that the theater groups should retain part of the building. However, by the end of the period covered by this report, the theater group had not yet vacated the central hall.

On April 17, 2001, Jehovah's Witnesses representative Arno Tungler was denied an entry visa at Tbilisi Airport, despite the fact that he had an official accreditation from the Ministry of Justice. As of the end of the period covered by this report, Tungler still was unable to obtain permission to enter the country.

According to some local human rights groups, as a result of pressure from the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Ministry of Education prevented the use of several school textbooks on the history of religion because they did not give absolute precedence to Orthodox Christianity. The textbooks eventually were eventually published and introduced into the school system after the incorporation of changes requested by the Church. On a number of occasions, Jehovah's Witnesses encountered difficulty importing religious literature into the country. Shipments were delayed by the Customs Department for lengthy periods of time.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Local police and security officials at times harassed nontraditional religious minority groups, especially Jehovah's Witnesses. There were a number of cases in which police not only failed to intervene to protect such minorities from attacks by Orthodox extremists (see Section III), but actually participated in or facilitated the attacks.

On September 8, 2000, police broke up an assembly of 700 members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Zugdidi, after setting up roadblocks to prevent an additional 1,300 from reaching the site. More than 50 members of Jehovah's Witnesses were beaten.

On September 28, 2000, police raided a Hare Krishna meeting house in Tbilisi and confiscated a large amount of religious literature. Some of the literature was released following the intervention of a local NGO; however, the remainder of the literature was destroyed.

In March 2001, the Central Baptist Church in Tbilisi was attacked by five masked men. The five men tied up the night watchmen and used a blowtorch to force their way into the room, which all the church's valuables were kept in a safe. There has been no investigation into or prosecution of this incident.

Throughout the period covered by this report, followers of excommunicated Orthodox priest Basili Mkalavishvili (Basilists) engaged in a number of violent attacks on nontraditional religious minorities, including Baptists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and especially, members of Jehovah's Witnesses. The attacks involved burning religious literature, breaking up religious gatherings, and beating up parishioners, in some cases with nail-studded sticks and clubs. Although law enforcement authorities were present during some of the attacks, in most instances, they have failed to intervene, leading to a widespread belief in police complicity in the activities of the Basilists. A criminal case was opened against Mkalavishvili in March 2000; however, the investigation is proceeding very slowly. While the criminal case prevented Mkalavishvili from making personal appearances during the most recent attacks, his followers have continued their violence in his absence. On occasion, members of Jvari (Cross), another Orthodox extremist group, have joined Mkalavishvili's supporters in their activities.

On September 15, 2000, Mkalavishvili and his followers destroyed the premises for a Jehovah's Witnesses conference in Marneuli and physically assaulted and robbed several dozen Jehovah's Witnesses while police looked on. Police also prevented a number of buses carrying Jehovah's Witnesses from reaching the conference. During December 2000 and January 2001, Basilists harassed several families of Jehovah's Witnesses, demanding that they stop holding meetings in their homes. On January 22, 2001, Mkalavishvili broke up a press conference in which Jehovah's Witnesses were presenting a petition with 130,000 signatures demanding government action against religious violence. Basilists seized and fled with most of the volumes of signatures. During April and May 2001, following the opening of a criminal case against Mkalavishvili, Basilists continued their attacks against members of Jehovah's Witnesses, which included several cases in which peaceful religious gatherings in Tbilisi, Rustavi, and other locales were broken up and Jehovah's Witnesses were beaten with sticks and clubs. Mkalavishvili publicly encouraged these latest attacks, although he did not participate due to fear of potential legal consequences.

On March 14, 2001, Basilists, with the assistance of traffic police, stopped a truck in Mtskheta carrying books imported by the United Bible Society and attempted to seize and burn them.

In May 2001, an appeals court overturned charges of hooliganism against a member of Jehovah's Witnesses and returned the case to the lower court for further investigation. This case began on October 1999, when a worship service of 120 parishioners in the Gldani district of Tbilisi was attacked violently by Basilists. The Gldani police refused to intervene. Sixteen persons were injured in the attack. In December 1999, the case was forwarded to the Gldani prosecutor's office for criminal charges. Despite the advocacy by the National Security Advisor for Human Rights on Jehovah's Witnesses' behalf, in January 2000, the Gldani regional prosecutor's office returned the case to the city prosecutor's office, stating that no violation had occurred. The case has been reopened and closed on several occasions since then. While it is currently open, the investigation is proceeding very slowly. In June 2000, however, the investigators charged two of the defendants with hooliganism stemming from the incident. They were convicted in court in September 2000, and received suspended sentences. One of the two appealed his conviction.

The Assemblies of God, several of whose members were beaten and abused verbally by police officials while conducting outdoor services in Tbilisi in May 1999, appealed to the European Court in Strasbourg. The police officials who interrupted the service sought to obtain the names of the church members. The Assemblies of God assert that it remains under local police surveillance. A number of members of the congregation were hesitant to return to their apartments and cars for a few days after the police actions. In September 1999 the group brought suit against the police and lost. The group alleged that the leader of a radical Orthodox group exerted pressure on the court. The suit was later appealed to the Supreme Court, which dismissed it in 2000. The group then appealed to the European Court, where the case remained pending at the end of the period covered by this report.

Despite this lack of legal redress there have been no reports that the Assemblies of God or the other three evangelical Protestant congregations in Tbilisi whose public services were discontinued for a period in 1999 due to interference from police and Basilists, have experienced further interference with public worship services. President Shevardnadze publicly condemned these acts, but there have been no investigations into the police conduct.

Regular and reliable information regarding the "Republic of Abkhazia," which is not recognized by any country and over which the Government of Georgia does not exercise control, is difficult to obtain. The Abkhaz "President," Vladislav Ardzimba, issued a decree in 1995 that banned Jehovah's Witnesses in Abkhazia. It remains in effect. A number of members of Jehovah's Witnesses have been detained subsequently; however, according to a representative of Jehovah's Witnesses, none were in detention at the end of the period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the area of the country under the control of the Government.

Forced Religious Conversion

There are 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 Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The public's attitude towards religion is ambivalent. Although many residents are not particularly observant, the link between Georgian Orthodoxy and Georgian ethnic and national identity is strong.

Despite their tolerance toward minority religious groups traditional to the country—including Catholics, Armenian Apostolic Christians, Jews, and Muslims—citizens remain very apprehensive about Protestants and

other nontraditional religions, which they see as taking advantage of the populace's economic hardship by gaining membership through handing out economic assistance to converts.

The Georgian Orthodox Church withdrew its membership from the World Council of Churches in 1997 in order to appease clerics strongly opposed to some of the Council's requirements and methods of operation and thereby avert a schism within the Church. Some senior church leaders remain highly exclusionary and profess theirs as the "one true faith." Some Protestant groups—especially evangelical groups—have been criticized by church officials and nationalist politicians as subversive. Eleven leaders of the Georgian Orthodox Church have argued that Christian missionaries should confine their activities to non-Christian areas.

Religious leaders of different faiths have spoken out against such criticism. Some NGO's advocate removing the clause in the Constitution concerning the Church's special role, claiming that it contradicts the Constitution's provisions regarding religious freedom.

The Muslim and Jewish communities report that they have encountered few societal problems. There is no pattern of anti-Semitism. In the past, President Shevardnadze has made statements criticizing anti-Semitic acts.

Nationalistic politicians manipulated the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in order to create public hostility. In April 2000, one politician inaccurately publicized the case of a hospitalized member of Jehovah's Witnesses who refused certain forms of medical treatment. The event was covered widely in the press and sparked a brief public debate over religious beliefs and medical ethics.

Many of the problems among traditional religious groups stem from disputes over property. The Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches have been unable to secure the return of their churches and other facilities that were closed during the Soviet period, many of which later were given to the Georgian Orthodox Church by the State. A prominent Armenian church in Tbilisi remains closed and the Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic Churches, with Protestant denominations, have had difficulty obtaining permission to construct new churches, reportedly in part as a result of pressure from the Georgian Orthodox Church. Georgian Orthodox Church authorities have accused Armenian believers of purposely altering some existing Georgian churches so that they would be mistaken for Armenian churches. The Catholic Church successfully completed the construction of a new church in Tbilisi in 1999 and one in Batumi in June 2000.

On March 6, 2001, four Orthodox priests led a mob in an attack on members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Sachkhere. The mayor and local police chief refused to intervene, and local law enforcement officials warned that there would be further attacks.

On March 24, 2001, eight visiting foreign Assembly of God members were attacked by a mob of Basilists, who stole their camera equipment and inflicted minor injuries upon them. Police reportedly were present and watching but made no effort to intervene.

On June 8, 2001, a mob of 30 Orthodox priests attacked Jehovah's Witnesses during a meeting in the western city of Martvili. The mob assaulted two women, beating one with a stick and striking the other in the face while the priests looked on.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialogue and policy of promoting human rights. On several occasions during the period covered by this report, senior U.S. Government officials, including the Ambassador and the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, raised with senior government officials, including the President, Parliament Speaker, and Internal Affairs and Justice Ministers. U.S. Government concerns regarding harassment of and attacks against nontraditional religious minorities. The Ambassador also raised this issue with the Catholicos-Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Embassy officials frequently met with representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses, Baptist Church, and Assemblies of God, as well as with NGO's concerned with religious freedom.

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