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Armenia

International Religious Freedom Report

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the law specifies some restrictions on the religious freedom of adherents of minority faiths, and there were some restrictions in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Armenian Apostolic Church, which has formal legal status as the national church, enjoys some privileges not available to adherents of other faiths. Jehovah's Witnesses continue to have their application for legal recognition as a registered religion rejected and report individual acts of discrimination. Other denominations occasionally report acts of discrimination, usually by mid-level or lower level government officials.

Relations among religions in society are generally amicable; however, societal attitudes towards some minority religions are ambivalent, and antipathy towards Muslims remains a problem.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 11,496 square miles, and its population is approximately 2 million.

The country is ethnically homogenous, with approximately 95 percent of the population classified as ethnic Armenian. About 90 percent of citizens belong nominally to the Armenian Apostolic Church, an Eastern Christian denomination whose spiritual center is located at the cathedral and monastery of Echmiatsin. Religious observance was discouraged strongly 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 level of religious practice is relatively low, although many former atheists now identify themselves with the national church.

For many citizens, Christian identity is an ethnic trait, with only a loose connection to religious belief. This identification was accentuated by the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in 1988-94, during which Armenia and Azerbaijan expelled their respective Azeri Muslim and Armenian Christian minorities, creating huge refugee populations in both countries. The head of the Church, Catholicos Karekin II (alternate spelling Garegin) was elected in October 1999 at Echmiatsin with the participation of Armenian delegates from around the world.

In 2001 the Armenian Apostolic Church engaged in a dispute with its Moscow archbishop, who was removed from office and excommunicated in May.

There are comparatively small, but in many cases growing, communities of the following faiths: Yezidi (a Kurdish religious/ethnic group which includes elements derived from Zoroastrianism, Islam, and animism, with some 50-60,000 nominal adherents); Catholic, both Roman and Mekhitarist (Armenian Uniate) (approximately 180,000 adherents); Pentecostal (approximately 25,000); Armenian Evangelical Church (approximately 5,000); Greek Orthodox (approximately 6,000); Baptist (approximately 2,000); Jehovah's Witnesses (approximately 6,000); unspecified "charismatic" Christian (about 3,000); Seventh-Day Adventist; Mormon; Jewish (500-1,000); Muslim; Baha'i; Hare Krishna; and pagan. Yezidis are concentrated primarily in agricultural areas around Mount Aragats, northwest of Yerevan. Armenian Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christians are concentrated in the northern region, while most Jews, Mormons and Baha'is are located in Yerevan. There is a remnant Muslim Kurdish community of a few hundred persons, many of which live in the Abovian region; a small group of Muslims of Azeri descent live primarily along the eastern or northern borders. In Yerevan there are approximately 1,000 Muslims, including Kurds, Iranians, and temporary residents from the Middle East.

Jehovah's Witnesses continue their missionary work fairly visibly and reported net gains in membership during 2000 and 2001. Evangelical Christians and Mormons also are engaged in missionary work.

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. A 1993 presidential decree, later superseded by the 1997 law, supplemented the 1991 law and further strengthened the position of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The 1991 law requires all other religious denominations and organizations to register with the State Council on Religious Affairs. The State Council on Religious Affairs is a state agency under the Prime Minister, without cabinet level representation. The Council does not include representatives of minority religions in its activities. 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." To qualify a religious organization must have at least 200 adult members (increased in 1997 from the previous figure of 50). A religious organization that has been refused registration may not publish newspapers or magazines, rent meeting places, broadcast programs on television or radio, or officially sponsor the visas of visitors. No previously registered religious group seeking re-registration under the 1997 law has been denied; however, the Council still denies registration to Jehovah's Witnesses. Several other religious groups are unregistered, specifically the Molokhany, a branch of the Russian "Old Believers," and some Yezidis. According to an official of the State Council on Religious Affairs, those two groups, which number in the hundreds, have not sought registration. As of June 30, 2001, there were 50 religious organizations, some of which are individual congregations from within the same denomination, registered with the State Council on Religious Affairs. All existing denominations have been reregistered annually. Almost all existing denominations, except for Hare Krishnas and Jehovah's Witnesses, have been reregistered. The Hare Krishnas do not have enough members to qualify, as their numbers by 1998 had dropped below even the previous membership threshold of 50. Although Jehovah's Witnesses have enough members, the State Council on Religious Affairs continues to deny them registration.

Current legislation permits religious education in state schools only by instructors appointed by the Armenian Apostolic Church. If requested by the school principal, the Armenian Apostolic Church will send priests to teach classes in religion and religious history in those schools. Other religious groups are not allowed provide religious instruction in schools, although they may do so in private homes to children of their members.

As a result of extended negotiations between the Government and the Armenian Apostolic Church, a memorandum was signed in April 2000 that provides for the two sides to negotiate a concordat, presently scheduled to be signed in September, 2001, in time for the 1,700th anniversary celebrations of the country's conversion to Christianity. The document is expected to regulate relations between the two bodies, settle disputes over ecclesiastical properties and real estate confiscated during the Soviet period, and define the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in such fields as education, morality, and the media.

In July 1998, President Kocharian created a Human Rights Commission, which has met with many minority organizations. The Law on Religion states that the State Council on Religious Affairs is to serve as a mediator in conflicts between religious groups; however, the Council has not yet done so.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

During the period covered by this report, most registered religious groups reported no serious legal impediments to their activities. However, members of faiths other than the Armenian Apostolic Church are subject to some government restrictions. In particular the 1991 law forbids "proselytizing" (undefined in the law) except by the Armenian Apostolic Church, and requires all other religious denominations and organizations to register with the State Council on Religious Affairs. The State Council on Religious Affairs continued to deny registration to Jehovah's Witnesses during the period covered by this report. The President's Human Rights Commission declined to intervene and recommended that Jehovah's Witnesses challenge their registration denial through the courts, as provided by law. Although Jehovah's Witnesses officials stated that they had filed such a legal challenge, it had not been heard by the courts by the end of the period covered by this report. An assembly of Jehovah's Witnesses approved slight changes to their charter in order to meet the country's legal requirements (for example, changing a commitment to "proselytize" into one to "witness"), but cautioned that they could not change fundamental articles of faith, such as opposition to military service. The court previously had stated that the denial was due to the group's opposition to military service; however, in 1999 and 2000 the Council defended its refusal to accept

applications by the Jehovah's Witnesses by stating that the group cannot be registered because "illegal proselytism" is allegedly integral to its activities. Discussions between Jehovah's Witnesses and the Council temporarily were suspended in 2001 due to a lack of progress on this issue. According to Jehovah's Witnesses officials, council representatives have met with them but have refused to assist in the group's efforts to gain registration.

Although the law bans foreign funding for foreign-based churches, the ban on foreign funding has not been enforced and is considered unenforceable by the State Council on Religious Affairs. The law also mandates that religious organizations other than the Armenian Apostolic Church need prior permission from the State Council on Religious Affairs to engage in religious activities in public places, to travel abroad, or to invite foreign guests to the country. However, in practice travel by religious personnel is not restricted. No action has been taken against missionaries, although groups such as the Mormons are allowed by the Council to have only a limited number of official missionaries present in the country. A 1993 presidential decree requires the State Council on Religious Affairs to investigate the activities of the representatives of registered religious organizations and to ban missionaries who engage in activities contrary to their status. However, the Council largely has been inactive, due in part to lack of resources, except for registering religious groups.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

At the end of the period covered by this report, 13 members of Jehovah's Witnesses still remained in prison charged with draft evasion or, if forcibly drafted, with desertion due to refusal to serve. During the year, 14 were released but still under house arrest, and 21 more were free on probation. Two more were in detention pending trial and seven had been released unconditionally and were not subject to future trials. A group estimated by an official of Jehovah's Witnesses to be approximately 50 members reportedly were in hiding from draft officials. Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses officials said that the increase in the number of those imprisoned persons was due to the fact that members of Jehovah's Witnesses who had been called for military service were going directly to police and turning themselves in rather than waiting until induction to declare conscientious objection.

As part of its required undertakings for joining the Council of Europe (COE), in January 2001, the Government pledged to pass a new law conforming to European standards on alternative military service within 3 years. Government officials stated that, according to their interpretation of COE regulations, those presently in prison as conscientious objectors were not required to be released until the new law was passed. However, COE officials stated that their interpretation was that the Government's undertaking required immediate release of such conscientious objectors. As of June 2001, no alternative on military service was passed before Parliament.

There are reports that hazing of new conscripts is more severe for Yezidis and other minorities. Jehovah's Witnesses are subject to even harsher treatment by military and civilian security officials, because their refusal to serve in the military is seen as a threat to national survival.

According to law, a religious organization that has been refused registration may not publish newspapers or magazines, rent meeting places, broadcast programs on television or radio, or officially sponsor the visas of visitors. Jehovah's Witnesses continue to experience difficulty renting meeting places and report that private individuals willing to rent them facilities are visited by police and warned not to do so. Lack of official visa sponsorship means that Jehovah's Witnesses visitors must pay for tourist visas. When shipped in bulk, Jehovah's Witness publications are seized at the border. Although members of Jehovah's Witnesses supposedly were allowed to bring in small quantities of printed materials for their own use, Jehovah's Witnesses officials reported that "spiritual letters" from one congregation to another, which they said were meant for internal rather than proselytizing purposes, continued to be confiscated by customs officials.

In August 2000, the mayor and the council of the town of Talin, in the western part of the country, expelled two members of Jehovah's Witnesses after residents alleged that they were going from door to door preaching and disturbing residents.

Members of Jehovah's Witnesses reported that the women were mocked and cursed by the mayor and bystanders, and that a resident of Talin who rented them rooms was threatened by the mayor with arrest and expulsion. Government officials refused to intervene in the action, stating that the women had been preaching illegally on behalf of an unregistered group.

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

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

Section III. Societal Attitudes

Relations among religions in society are generally amicable; however, societal attitudes towards some minority religions are ambivalent, and antipathy towards Muslims remains a problem.

The Armenian Apostolic Church is a member of the World Council of Churches and, despite doctrinal differences, has friendly official relations with many major Christian denominations, including the Eastern Orthodox churches, the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church, and major Protestant churches. Catholicos Karekin II visited the Vatican in November 2000, and the Vatican announced that Pope John Paul II intends to visit the country in September 2001. Relations between foreign-based religious groups and the dominant Armenian Apostolic Church are also strengthened through cooperation in assistance projects. Various registered Christian humanitarian organizations are working with the Armenian Apostolic Church to distribute humanitarian assistance and educational religious materials.

Although such activities contribute to mutual understanding, they take place in an undercurrent of competition. Suppressed through 70 years of Soviet rule, the Armenian Apostolic Church has neither the trained priests nor the material resources to fill immediately the spiritual void created by the demise of Communist ideology. Nontraditional religious organizations are viewed with suspicion, and foreign-based denominations operate cautiously for fear of being seen as a threat by the Armenian Apostolic Church. After his election in October 1999, one of the first actions of Karekin II was to create a Secretariat for Ecumenical Outreach to other Christian denominations.

Societal attitudes toward most minority religions are ambivalent. Many citizens are not religiously observant, but the link between religion and Armenian ethnicity is strong. As a result of the Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan, most of the country's Muslim population was forced to leave the country. Antipathy towards Muslims remains a problem, and the few Muslims remaining in the country keep a low profile, despite generally amicable relations between the Government and Iran. There is no formally operating mosque, although Yerevan's one surviving 18th century mosque, which was restored with Iranian funding, is open for regular Friday prayers on a tenuous legal basis.

There was no officially sponsored violence reported against minority religious groups during the period. Yezidi children on occasion report hazing by teachers and classmates. Some observers report increasingly unfavorable attitudes towards Jehovah's Witnesses among the general population, both because they are seen as "unpatriotic" for refusing military service and because of a widespread but unsubstantiated belief that they pay money to the desperately poor for conversions. The press reported a number of complaints lodged by citizens against Jehovah's Witnesses for alleged illegal proselytizing. They are the focus of religious attacks and hostile preaching by some Armenian Apostolic Church clerics.

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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 US Ambassador and embassy officials maintain close contact with the Catholicos at Echmiatsin and with leaders of other major religious and ecumenical groups in the country. In 2000 and 2001, embassy officials met with the Military Prosecutor to discuss, among other topics, hazing of minority conscripts and the status of Jehovah's Witnesses, and in 2000, met with the State Council on Religions to urge that progress be made towards registering Jehovah's Witnesses. The Embassy also maintains regular contact with traveling regional representatives of foreign-based religious groups such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses and raises their concerns with the Government.

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