

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	200
Land:	Armenien
Kilde:	U.S. Department of state
Titel:	2011 Report on International Religious Freedom – Armenia
Udgivet:	30. juli 2012
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	30. august 2012

Title	2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Armenia
Publisher	United States Department of State
Country	Armenia
Publication Date	30 July 2012
Cite as	United States Department of State, <i>2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Armenia</i> , 30 July 2012, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/502105df2.html [accessed 29 August 2012]
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2011 Report on International Religious Freedom - Armenia

Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
July 30, 2012

[Covers calendar year from 1 January 2011 to 31 December 2011]

Executive Summary

The constitution protects religious freedom, and in practice the government generally respected religious freedom. Some laws and policies restrict the religious freedom of members of religious groups, but the government generally did not enforce these legal restrictions. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Many media outlets demonstrated bias against religious minorities and some criticized the Armenian Apostolic Church.

U.S. embassy officials maintained close contact with majority and minority religious leaders and promoted religious freedom publicly and during meetings with government officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

Approximately 90 percent of citizens belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, one of six Oriental Orthodox churches. The Armenian Apostolic Church's spiritual center is the Etchmiadzin cathedral and monastery located near the capital of Yerevan.

There are small communities of other religious groups, each constituting less than 5 percent of the population: Roman Catholic, Armenian Uniate (Mekhitarist) Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Armenian Evangelical Christian, Molokan, Pentecostal, Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist, various groups of charismatic Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Yezidis (non-Muslim Kurds who practice Yezidism), Jews, Sunni Muslim Kurds, Shiite Muslims, pagans, and others.

Yezidis are concentrated primarily in agricultural areas around Mount Aragats, northwest of Yerevan. Armenian Catholics live primarily in the north, while most Jews, Mormons, and Orthodox Christians reside in Yerevan, along with a small community of Muslims,

mostly Shiites, including Iranians and temporary residents from the Middle East.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution protects religious freedom; however, other laws and policies place some restrictions on the religious freedom of members of religious groups.

The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations does not explicitly mandate registration of nongovernmental organizations; however, only registered organizations have legal status. Unregistered groups may not publish more than 1,000 copies of newspapers or magazines, rent meeting places, broadcast programs on television or radio, or officially sponsor visitors' visas, although individual members may do 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 apply to the religious organizations of national ethnic minorities, though most have chosen to register. 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.

The constitution and the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations establish separation of church and state but recognize "the exclusive mission of the Armenian Apostolic 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 law grants certain privileges to the Armenian Apostolic Church that are not available to other religious groups. For example, the Armenian Apostolic Church is allowed to have permanent representatives in hospitals, orphanages, boarding schools, military units, and places of detention, while other religious organizations may have representatives in these places on request only. In general the law formally recognizes the historical role the Armenian Apostolic Church plays in society, since most citizens see it as an integral part of national identity and cultural heritage.

The law prohibits but does not define "soul hunting," a term that describes both proselytism and forced conversion. The prohibition applies to all groups, including the Armenian Apostolic Church. Most registered religious groups reported no significant legal impediments to their activities during the year.

The law mandates that public schools offer a secular education. Only personnel authorized and trained by the government may teach in public schools. Courses in the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church are part of the public school curriculum and are taught by public school teachers. The Armenian Apostolic Church has the right to participate in the development of the study program and textbooks for this course, as well as define the qualifications for teachers of the course. The Armenian Apostolic Church may also nominate candidates to teach the course. All religious organizations may establish groups for religious instruction to train their members, using facilities belonging to or set aside for them. The law grants the Armenian Apostolic Church the right to organize voluntary religious classes in state educational institutions using the facilities and resources of those institutions.

The law allows conscientious objectors – subject to government approval – to perform either noncombatant military or labor service rather than serve as combat-trained military personnel. The law also criminalizes evasion of alternative labor service. However, many conscientious objectors regarded military control of the alternative labor service as unacceptable.

The criminal code prohibits incitement of national, racial, or religious hatred.

Although the law prohibits foreign funding of foreign-based denominations, the government did not enforce that prohibition.

The government observes January 6, the day on which the Armenian Apostolic Church celebrates Christmas, as a national holiday. During the year the government designates five church observances as official Monday holidays, when it is customary to visit the graves of loved ones. The preceding or following Saturdays are designated as workdays.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country, including religious prisoners and detainees.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, during the year 13 Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted for evasion of military and alternative service. Eight of those sentenced received a 30-month sentence, four a 24-month sentence, and one a 36-month sentence.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, 58 of their members remained in prison on December 31 for refusing, on religious grounds, to perform mandatory military or alternative labor service. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives stated that the prisoners refused the alternative to military service because they objected to the military's control over the alternative service.

On November 11, the Malatia Sebastia first instance court sentenced Andranik Makvetsyan, a Jehovah's Witness, to six months in prison. Makvetsyan was initially investigated and tried on charges of battery, threats, and arrogation over an altercation with a priest of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Artak Artenyan. The court acquitted Makvestyan on the original charges but convicted him of preventing Artenyan's "right to preach" near a church and his "right to prevent" Makvetsyan from proselytizing. On May 15, Artenyan approached and verbally accosted Makvetsyan after spotting him discussing the Bible on a public walkway in the vicinity of the Holy Trinity Church, where Artenyan served. Artenyan claimed that Makvetsyan hit him once, threatened him, and briefly took his cell phone. The prosecutor declined to open a criminal investigation into Artenyan's conduct and only pursued charges against Makvetsyan. Artenyan's final submission to the court said what really mattered was the expectation of millions of Armenians that the court would "prove the antisocial, anti-state, anti-national, and . . . anti-democratic activity" practiced by Jehovah's Witnesses in the country.

On December 23, the International Federation for Human Rights and its member organization, the local Civil Society Institute, released a statement condemning the imprisonment of Andranik Makvetsyan and called upon the Armenian authorities to release him, ensure religious organizations' freedom to preach, maintain neutrality in religious matters, and promote tolerance in society.

On December 28, the Civil Society Institute submitted an *amicus curiae* brief to the court of appeal. The brief argued that the conviction unjustly interfered with Makvetsyan's right to express his personal beliefs and violated his religious freedom. At year's end, Makvetsyan remained incarcerated pending the outcome of his appeal.

On July 13 a trial court found a Pentecostal Church pastor, Vladimir Baghdasaryan, guilty of obstructing the professional activities of journalists and fined him 200,000 drams (\$520). On November 10, 2010 two journalists from the privately owned pro-government Shant television station entered, without permission, private property where the Pentecostal Church held its gatherings. The journalists started filming inside the building and refused Baghdasaryan's demands to stop filming and leave. According to Baghdasaryan, the journalists insulted those present and left only after Baghdasaryan called the police. The journalists claimed that Baghdasaryan used violence and obstructed their professional activities, while Baghdasaryan stated that he had only covered the camera with his hand and tried to move one of the journalists toward the exit by holding his arm.

Throughout the reporting period, local observers and members of religious minorities reported that negative attitudes toward children involved in religious groups other than the Armenian Apostolic Church continued to be apparent in schools, though at a more subdued level in comparison with previous years. Such attitudes were more apparent during classes on the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church, which, according to reports, contained elements of religious instruction.

Throughout the year a number of state officials made statements against religious minorities in the country. According to local observers, politicians, as well as media, exploited the issue for their political agenda in advance of national parliamentary elections in 2012.

On October 28, the head of the parliamentary faction of the ruling Republican Party of Armenia, Galust Sahakyan, said that sects were more dangerous than Azerbaijan's threats of war and called for the Armenian Apostolic Church to be strengthened. On May 10, another member of parliament, Hovhannes Sahakyan, said Jehovah's Witnesses "had not only turned 'God's word' into business but were conducting destructive politics against Armenia." On March 23, the head of the youth wing of the ruling party, Karen Avagyan, at a roundtable discussion entitled "No to Sects," said that youth must stand next to the church and fight against the evil of "sects." In an interview on January 21, another member of parliament, Mkrtich Minasyan, called Jehovah's Witnesses evil and endorsed a ban on their activities.

On September 29 the secretary of the National Security Council, Artur Baghdasaryan, announced the creation of an inter-agency committee to work on a strategy to fight against destructive and totalitarian sects. He said such "sects" presented one of the most significant threats to national security.

In an August 3 interview, the head of the Government Department on National Minorities and Religious Affairs, Vardan Astsatryan, spoke about the dangers of "sects." He said that Jehovah's Witnesses' active preaching on the streets was unacceptable and should be limited to special areas allocated for them.

There were reports from different religious minority groups that they were unable to rent large halls from private owners for holding meetings. The owners of these facilities either refused to rent the venues or canceled after initial arrangements were made, allegedly after being pressured by the Armenian Apostolic Church or representatives of law enforcement bodies to turn down the requests of "sects."

For example, Jehovah's Witnesses reported that a few hours before the start of their convention at a rented auditorium in Vanadzor, the owner refused to honor the contract. Approximately 600 Witnesses planned to attend the three-day convention scheduled for June 10-12. When the Witnesses arrived for the program, the entrance to the auditorium was locked. According to the Witnesses, the owner claimed he had received a telephone call from someone threatening to bomb the facility if it was used by Jehovah's Witnesses and that he was willing to allow the convention to take place only if he received approval from the authorities. According to the group, the regional governor confirmed that he had called the owner of the convention facility on June 9 and told the owner to "consider the consequences" of renting the facility to Jehovah's Witnesses. The governor said his comments were not meant as a threat but a warning that violence against Jehovah's Witnesses could break out at the facility. According to the group, the governor had agreed to notify the owner on the evening of June 10 that the governor's office had no objection to the convention. However, the owner chose not to provide the facility to the Witnesses for the convention.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. The general population expressed negative attitudes about minority religious groups. These attitudes often did not affect personal and neighborly relationships but did reflect a general perception of minority religious groups as threats to the state, a sentiment

reinforced by media outlets. Members of minority religious groups experienced societal discrimination and intolerance, including in the workplace.

Many media outlets, including state-owned television, continued to label minority religious groups actively engaged in proselytism as "sects." Various television stations continued to broadcast discussions, news coverage, and "special reports," in which participants labeled religious minority groups as enemies of the state. Media outlets, especially the print media and their online versions, published inaccurate articles portraying religious minorities as criminals and spies. Some reporters discussed "sectarian terrorism." Some articles implicitly condoned violence directed toward members of "sects." Some media outlets also published critical reports about the Armenian Apostolic Church.

In April the Yerevan Writers' Union presented Artur Simonyan, the senior pastor of the Word of Life church, its "Best Author" award. The award spurred negative reports about the Word of Life Church, condemning the writers' union for recognizing a "sectarian." For example, on April 29 an online news agency published an interview with an Armenian Apostolic Church priest who condemned the award, saying the union should not have recognized a person who is creating havoc through his preaching.

On March 10, *168 Zham* newspaper wrote about the increasing number of reports criticizing the Armenian Apostolic Church for having close ties with oligarchs. The newspaper specifically cited the example of a widely publicized and heavily criticized acquisition of an expensive Bentley automobile by Armenian Apostolic Church Archbishop Navasard Ktchoyan.

On October 15, a small but well-organized group protested against the influence of dangerous sects in Armenia. The protesters chanted "No to Soul-Hunting," "I am Apostolic," and distributed fliers with pro-Armenian Apostolic Church messaging on one side and a list of "dangerous sects" on the other. The list of sects included, among others, Baptists, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Word of Life, and Herbalife. The protesters presented a petition to the government calling for legislation to clearly define and criminalize "soul-hunting."

The Jehovah's Witnesses reported that there were at least nine cases during the year when their members were accosted by villagers, threatened, and asked to leave. In one case on October 9 in Ghazanchi village in northern Armenia, about 10 children followed a group of Jehovah's Witnesses and threw stones at them. A local Armenian Apostolic Church priest appeared, accompanied by the local school's teacher of church history. The priest said only he could permit preaching in the village. The priest ripped up the brochures of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials maintained close contact with majority and minority religious leaders and promoted religious freedom as part of their public affairs outreach and during meetings with government officials.

In addition, U.S. embassy officials, along with members of other international organizations, continued to encourage the government to adopt a new law on alternative service for conscientious objectors that complies with international standards.
