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Georgia

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GEORGIA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

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 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 that require the registration of religious groups. However, religious groups that perform humanitarian works, the Salvation Army among them, must be registered as charitable organizations.

Orthodox Christianity is the dominant religion and most ethnic Georgians (approximately 70 percent of the population, according to the 1989 census) nominally associate themselves with the Georgian Orthodox Church. In addition there are a small number of (mostly ethnic Russian) believers from three dissident Orthodox sects: the Malakani; Storoveryi (Old Believers); and Dukhoboryi. Orthodox churches serving other non-Georgian ethnic groups, such as Russians and Greeks, are subordinate to the Georgian Orthodox Church but generally use the language of their communicants. The period of Soviet rule saw a sharp decline in the number of active churches and priests, as well as a near-total absence of religious education. As a result, the level of religious practice is relatively low, though many former atheists now identify themselves with the Georgian Orthodox Church. Membership in the Church has increased since independence in 1991. It maintains four theological seminaries, two academies, several schools, and 27 church dioceses. The Church is headed by a Catholicos-Patriarch, Ilya II, whose See is in Tbilisi.

Several religions traditionally have co-existed with Georgian Orthodoxy and still are practiced, including the Armenian Apostolic Church, which is older and varies in points of doctrine and ritual from the Georgian Orthodox Church. A large concentration of Armenians live in the southern Javakheti region, and they constitute approximately 8 percent of the population. Islam is prevalent among Azerbajani communities in the eastern part of the country and also may be found in the regions of Abkhazia and Abkhazia. Some 5 percent of the population are nominally Muslim. Judaism is practiced in a number of Jewish communities throughout the country but especially in the largest cities of Tbilisi and Kutaisi. Approximately 7,000 to 8,000 Jews remain, following a large emigration beginning in the early 1970's. Before that, Jewish officials estimate, there had been as many as 100,000. There are also small numbers of Roman Catholic and Lutheran worshippers.

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, Protestant denominations have become more prominent, including Baptists (composed of Russian, Georgian, Armenian, Ossetian, and Kurdish groups); Seventh-Day Adventists; Pentecostals (both Georgian and Russian); Jehovah's Witnesses (local representatives say that the group has been in the country since 1953 and has about 40,000 adherents); the New Apostolic Church; and the Assembly of God. There are also a few Bahai's, Hare Krishnas, and Kurdish Yezidis. There are no available membership numbers for these groups, but combined, their membership probably totals about a hundred thousand persons.

Throughout the country's history, the Georgian Orthodox Church has been a key rallying point for patriotic sentiment. The Church has lobbied Parliament and the Government for laws that would grant it special status and restrict the activities of missionaries from "nontraditional" religions. Various draft laws, some modeled on the Russian law on religion, have been introduced but thus far not been adopted by parliament. However, some Protestant groups--especially evangelical groups--have been criticized by Church officials and nationalist politicians as subversive.

As parliamentary elections scheduled for October 1999 approach, some politicians are attempting to attract votes by exploiting nationalist undercurrents and may support the views of the Church as one means to this end.

Like many other religious institutions during the Soviet era, the Church largely was suppressed; many churches were destroyed or turned into museums, concert halls, and other secular establishments. As a result of the new policies of the Soviet government toward religion in the late 1980s, the present Catholicos-Patriarch began consecrating formerly-closed churches throughout the country. The Church remains very active in the restoration of these religious facilities and is lobbying the Government for the return of properties it believes 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.)

Many of the problems among traditional religious groups stem from arguments over such properties. The Roman Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church 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. A prominent Armenian church in Tbilisi remains closed and the Roman Catholic Church and the Armenian Apostolic Church, as is the case 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. In turn, Georgian Orthodox Church authorities have accused Armenian believers of purposely altering some existing Georgian churches so that they would be mistaken for Armenian churches. At present, these groups are taking such arguments to court.

The Jewish community also experienced delays in the return of property confiscated during Soviet rule. A former synagogue, rented from the Government by a theater group, was ordered by the courts to be returned to the Jewish community in 1997. The theater group refused to comply and started a publicity campaign with anti-Semitic overtones to justify its continued occupation of the building. In December 1997, President Shevardnadze promised Jewish leaders that the synagogue would be returned before the 2,600-year celebration. However, the President's order was not enforced, and the building remains in the hands of the theater group.

On balance there was a slight decline in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. There was increased harassment of Protestant evangelical groups by local officials in certain areas who, in some cases, apparently were influenced by the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Members of a number of Protestant, particularly evangelical, organizations have been detained or otherwise harassed, and in the spring of 1999 such harassment increased. Six tons of Jehovah's Witnesses' books and pamphlets were impounded by the customs authorities for two months before being released. A nationalist parliamentarian opened a court case against Jehovah's Witnesses, seeking to ban them on the grounds that they present a threat to the State and the Georgian Orthodox Church. Lawyers for Jehovah's Witnesses argued that the suit violates the Constitution and appealed to a higher court to have the case thrown out. No decision has been rendered. Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses who sought to procure the release of the impounded materials were confronted by a demonstration led by a Georgian Orthodox Priest.

Earlier shipments of religious materials rarely were held for more than a week or two and always were released, according to representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Foreign missionaries continued to report some incidents of harassment in rural areas and small towns on the part of Orthodox priests and their supporters, local police, and security officials. Jehovah's Witnesses indicate that they have experienced no problems in Tbilisi and only occasional problems in rural areas. Local police chiefs in Gori and Kaspi tried to prevent Jehovah's Witnesses from conducting open air meetings in Gori and Kaspi in May and June 1999. However, the meetings took place, in one case because a large crowd already had gathered, and in the other because of the intervention by a central government official.

Several members of another evangelical group, the Assembly of God, were beaten and verbally abused by police officials while conducting outdoor services in a residential area of Tbilisi. The officials sought to obtain the names of the church members. The group asserts that it continues to be under local police surveillance. A number of members of the congregation were hesitant to return to their apartments and cars for a few days.

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

There are no reports of the forced religious conversion 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.

The Abkhaz president, Vladislav Ardzimba issued a decree in 1995 that banned Jehovah's Witnesses in Abkhazia. Abkhaz authorities reportedly detained Maxim Harizia, a local representative of Jehovah's Witnesses, and five other members of Jehovah's Witnesses in April 1999 for violating the decree. They were released in early May after their counsel argued that their detention violated a freedom of conscience clause in the Abkhaz constitution. However, one member of Jehovah's Witnesses, Atgura Ashuba, was rearrested in May 1998, beaten, tried, and sentenced to 5 years of imprisonment for deserting the Abkhaz military forces.

## **Section II. Societal Attitudes**

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 to avert a schism within the Church. Some senior Church leaders remain highly exclusionary and emphasize theirs as the "one true faith." Leaders of the Georgian Orthodox Church have argued that foreign Christian missionaries should confine their activities to non-Christian areas. Orthodox priests and their supporters, local police, and security officials at times reportedly harassed foreign missionaries in rural areas and small towns (also see Section I). According to one local human rights group, due to pressure from the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Ministry of Education prevented the use of two school textbooks on the history of religion because they did not give absolute precedence to Orthodox Christianity.

The public's attitude towards religion is ambivalent. Even though many residents are not particularly observant, the link between Georgian Orthodoxy and Georgian ethnic and national identity is strong. However, a number of the liberal intelligentsia regard the church as a bastion of conservative chauvinism. Some nongovernmental organizations advocate removing the clause in the Constitution concerning the Church's special role, claiming that it contradicts the Constitution's stipulations regarding religious freedom.

Women and older persons predominate at the Church's services, and worshippers often only stop long enough to genuflect and light a candle. Financial restrictions limit the Church's ability to train its clergy fully or perform many pastoral functions beyond the liturgy.

The Islamic and Jewish communities report that they have encountered few societal problems. There is no pattern of anti-Semitism. Jewish leaders attribute isolated acts of anti-Semitism, including the publication of anti-Semitic newspaper articles and the destruction of Jewish communal property, to general instability and disorder. In December 1998, vandals toppled and shattered 60 gravestones at a Jewish cemetery in Tbilisi. President Eduard Shevardnadze made a public statement criticizing that act of vandalism, but a subsequent investigation into the crime produced no findings. There has been little evidence of Islamic fundamentalist activity.

The occasional instances of religious intolerance are a reflection of prejudice by church officials and ignorance of or disregard for the law by certain local police and political authorities.

In May and June 1999, nationalist groups (i.e., supporters of former president Zviad Gamsakhurdia) protested plans to send an exhibition of artifacts and religious relics to the United States. The Patriarchate also publicly objected to the exhibit.

## **Section III. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Embassy has sought to promote the resolution of complaints from religious groups that allege harassment by local authorities, pointing out the importance of religious freedom. In addition, the Embassy is engaged in promoting local awareness of religious freedom by meeting regularly with officials from local and international nongovernmental organizations working on the issue. In the period covered by this report the Embassy has discussed religious freedom issues with representatives

of the Georgian Orthodox Church, and of the Jewish, Islamic and Protestant faiths. In addition, the Embassy has been in contact on these issues with local and international human rights organizations, as well as with government officials from the legislative and executive branches who work on religious and human rights issues.

The Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor discussed religious freedom issues with the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Tbilisi in March 1998 and in Washington in May 1998.

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