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Armenia**International Religious Freedom Report 2004**

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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. The Armenian Apostolic Church, which has formal legal status as the national church, enjoys some privileges not available to adherents of other faiths.

There was no overall change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. According to legislation passed in November 2003, the Law on Alternative Military Service took effect on June 1, but had not been implemented by the end of the period covered by this report. The law provides "conscientious objectors" (after receiving the formal approval of a government panel) the opportunity to serve in either noncombat military or civil service duties instead of as conscripted military personnel. In June, the Government again denied the Jehovah's Witnesses application for formal registration as a religious organization. The registrar's office cited technical problems with the application. Other denominations occasionally report acts of discrimination, usually by mid-level or lower level government officials.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, societal attitudes toward some minority religions are ambivalent.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 11,496 square miles, and its population is approximately 3 million.

The country is ethnically homogeneous, with approximately 98 percent of the population classified as ethnic Armenian. Approximately 90 percent of citizens nominally belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, an Eastern Christian denomination whose spiritual center is located at the cathedral and monastery of Etchmiadzin. 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 number of active religious practitioners 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. Many Azeris left Armenia during the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh in 1988-94, increasing Armenia's religious and ethnic homogeneity. The head of the Church, Catholicos Garegin II (alternate spelling Karekin), was elected in 1999 at Etchmiadzin with the participation of Armenian delegates from around the world.

There are comparatively small, but in many cases growing, communities of other faiths. The Government does not provide figures for religious adherents, but the congregants themselves offered the following estimates: Yezidi (a Kurdish religious/ethnic group which includes elements derived from Zoroastrianism, Islam, and animism, with approximately 30,000 to 40,000 nominal adherents); Catholic, both Roman and Mekhitarist (Armenian Uniate) (approximately 180,000); Pentecostal (approximately 25,000); Greek Orthodox (approximately 1,176); Jehovah's



Witnesses (approximately 7,500); Armenian Evangelical Church (approximately 5,000); Baptist (approximately 2,000); unspecified "charismatic" Christian (approximately 3,000); Seventh-day Adventist (800 to 900); the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (1,500 to 2,000); Jewish (500 to 1,000), and Baha'i (over 200). In addition, small Muslim, Hare Krishna, and pagan communities exist in the country. 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'i are located in Yerevan. In Yerevan, there are approximately 1,000 Muslims, including Kurds, Iranians, and temporary residents from the Middle East.

Members of Jehovah's Witnesses continue their missionary work and reported gains in membership during the period covered by this report. Evangelical Christians and Mormons also sponsor missionary programs in the country.

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.

As a result of extended negotiations between the Government and the Armenian Apostolic Church, a memorandum was signed in 2000 that provided for the two sides to negotiate a concordat. This was scheduled to occur in time for the 1,700th anniversary celebrations in 2001 of the country's conversion to Christianity; however, disagreements in some areas precluded this and negotiations were in progress at the end of the period covered by this report. 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.

The law requires all religious denominations and organizations other than the Armenian Apostolic Church to register in order to operate without restrictions. A March 2002 cabinet decision abolished the Council on Religious Affairs (CRA), and created a new office under the Prime Minister to oversee religious affairs. A high-ranking official from the former CRA was appointed as the Prime Minister's Advisor on Religious Affairs. In addition, the cabinet established the National Minorities and Religious Affairs Department, which reports to the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff. The function of registering religious groups in Armenia was transferred to the Office of the State Registrar, with the Advisor on Religious Affairs and the head of the National Minorities and Religious Affairs Department holding consultative roles in the registration process. After establishing the new agency, the Government required all groups wishing registration to reapply. To qualify for registration, 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." A religious organization must have at least 200 adult members. Unregistered religious organizations may not publish newspapers or magazines, rent meeting places, broadcast programs on television or radio, or officially sponsor the visas of visitors. By the end of the period covered by this report, the Government had registered 55 religious organizations, some of which are individual congregations from within the same denomination.

There is no formally operating mosque; however, Yerevan's one surviving 18th century mosque, which was restored with Iranian funding, is open for regular Friday prayers. While its legal basis is tenuous since it is not registered as a religious facility, the Government does not create any obstacles for Muslims who wish to pray there.

The law permits religious education in state schools. Government personnel train selected teachers from each school to teach the religious education curriculum. The beliefs of the Armenian Apostolic Church form the basis of this curriculum. If requested by the school principal, the Armenian Apostolic Church sends priests to teach classes in religion and religious history in those schools. Students may choose not to attend religious education classes. Many

schools teach the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church as part of coursework on religion, covering global religions in elementary school and the Armenian Apostolic Church in middle school. Other religious groups are not allowed to provide religious instruction in schools, although registered groups may do so in private homes to children of their members.

The Government's new Human Rights Ombudsman, together with the head of the Department on National Minorities and Religious Affairs, met with many religious minority organizations during the period covered by this report.

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 prohibits "proselytizing" (undefined in the law), except by the Armenian Apostolic Church, and restricts unregistered groups from publishing, broadcasting, or inviting official visitors to the country.

In June, the Government again denied the application of the Jehovah's Witnesses for formal registration as a religious organization. The registrars' office cited technical problems with the application. The Jehovah's Witnesses expressed satisfaction that they were making progress toward registration and plan to correct the technical problems and resubmit their application in the near future.

According to the head of the National Minorities and Religious Affairs Department, some minority religious groups including the Molokany and some Yezidi groups, which might number in the hundreds, have not sought registration. The only previously registered religious group that was denied reregistration was the Hare Krishnas, whose membership had dropped below the 200-member threshold.

Although the law prohibits foreign funding for foreign-based churches, the Government has not enforced this ban and considers it unenforceable. Travel by religious personnel is not restricted in practice. No action has been taken against missionaries. Religious groups did not report any investigations of missionaries during the period covered by this report.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

At the end of the period covered by this report, 23 members of Jehovah's Witnesses remained in prison and 3 in pretrial detention charged with draft evasion or, if forcibly drafted, with desertion due to refusal to serve; 43 members who had been serving terms were released to house arrest after serving one-third of their sentences. Representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses said that those imprisoned were members of their community who had been called for military service and went directly to police to turn themselves in rather than waiting until induction to declare conscientious objection. The Law on Alternative Military Service took effect on June 1, but the Government had not created implementing regulations by the end of the reporting period. The law will allow conscientious objectors to participate in an alternative civil service instead of compulsory military duty. One alternative method would allow conscientious objectors to serve in the army without carrying arms for 36 months, and another would allow them to do civil service for 42 months. Both options are substantially longer than the 2 years of service required of those in the Army. Government officials have stated that the law would be implemented by Fall 2004; however, the Government had not formed a committee to design these regulations by the end of the period covered by this report.

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

During the period covered by this report, members of Jehovah's Witnesses did not report experiencing difficulty renting meeting places as they had reported in the past. Lack of local official visa sponsorship means that Jehovah's Witnesses visitors must pay for tourist visas. In previous years, there were reports that government officials seized Jehovah's Witness

publications at the border. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses reportedly are allowed to bring in small quantities of printed materials for their own use.

The International Helsinki Federation reported that there have been numerous allegations in recent years that members of nontraditional religions, including Jehovah's Witnesses, have been dismissed from their jobs or physically attacked due to their faith. A representative of the Jehovah's Witnesses stated that the organization was not aware of any of their members being dismissed from his or her job during the period covered by this report.

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

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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, societal attitudes toward some minority religions are ambivalent.

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. In 2001, the Armenian Apostolic Church celebrated the 1,700th anniversary of the official conversion of Armenia to Christianity.

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.

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 Azeri population, who were almost all Muslim, left the country. The few Muslims remaining in the country keep a low profile, despite generally amicable relations between the Government and Iran.

There was no officially sponsored violence reported against minority religious groups during the period. Yezidi children on occasion reported hazing by teachers and classmates. Some observers reported increasingly unfavorable attitudes toward members of 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 members of Jehovah's Witnesses for alleged illegal proselytizing. Representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses reported a few cases during the year in which the Procurator General's office sent official warnings to individual members regarding their proselytizing activities, and the group was at times the focus of verbal religious attacks and hostile preaching by some Armenian Apostolic Church clerics. In September 2003, teenagers in the town of Aparan physically assaulted four Jehovah's Witnesses. According to a Helsinki Committee report citing eye-witness accounts, a local priest of the Armenian Apostolic Church appeared to have encouraged the attack.

Although it is difficult to document, it is likely that there is some informal societal discrimination

in employment against members of certain minority religious groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Ambassador and Embassy officials maintain close contact with the Catholicos at Etchmiadzin and with leaders of other major religious and ecumenical groups in the country. During the period covered by this report, Embassy officials met with the Military Prosecutor to discuss, among other topics, hazing of minority conscripts and the status of Jehovah's Witnesses, met with government officials to discuss the proposed law on alternative military service, and continued to meet with government officials to urge that progress be made toward 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. Embassy officials closely monitor trials related to issues of religious freedom and take an active role in policy forums and nongovernmental organization roundtables regarding religious freedom.

During the reporting period, the U.S. Mission hosted several roundtable meetings and receptions in honor of U.S. representatives of religious organizations. Leaders of local minority religious groups were regularly welcomed at these events.

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