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2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:

Armenia

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

U.S. Department of State, September 5, 2000

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22/11-00

ARMENIA

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, which has formal legal status as the national church.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

Most citizens are free to worship as they please, and there is a generally amicable relationship among religions in society; however, societal attitudes toward minority religions are ambivalent, and antipathy toward Muslims remains a serious problem. Although the law mandates separation of church and state, most officials are at least nominally members of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Proselytizing by other religions is prohibited, and other denominations occasionally report acts of discrimination, usually by mid-level or lower level bureaucrats. Jehovah's Witnesses are not recognized as a registered denomination and face bureaucratic and legal obstacles; however, the group operates in a fairly open manner, despite periodic harassment. The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and its policy of promoting human rights, the rule of law, and official transparency and accountability in government functions.

Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

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 A presidential decree issued in 1993, later superceded by the 1997 law, supplemented the 1991 law and strengthened the position of the Armenian Apostolic Church. The decree enjoins the 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 except for registering religious groups, and no action was taken against missionaries during the period covered by this report. 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 reregistration 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 Molokhodny, a branch of the "old Believers," and most Yezidis. According to an official of the State Council on Religious Affairs, the Yezidis, whose congregations are small (numbering in the hundreds), have not sought registration. Members of faiths other than the Armenian Apostolic Church are subject to some government restrictions. In particular, the 1991 law forbids "proselytizing" (which is 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. 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 (raised in 1997 from the previous figure of 50). The law bans foreign funding for foreign-based churches. It also mandates that religious organizations other than the Armenian Apostolic Church must seek 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. As of mid-2000, 50 religious organizations, some created by splits in previously registered groups, were registered with the State Council on Religious Affairs.

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 in time for signing by the 1,700th anniversary celebrations of Armenia's conversion to Christianity, scheduled to take place in 2001. This document is expected to regulate relations between the two bodies, settle disputes over ecclesiastical properties and real estate confiscated during Soviet times, and define the role of the Armenian Apostolic Church in such fields as education, morality, and the media.

Religious Demography

Armenia is an ethnically homogenous country, with around 95 percent of the population classified as ethnic Armenian. Approximately 90 percent of the population nominally belong 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 Soviet times, leading to a sharp decline in the number of active churches and priests, the closure of virtually all monasteries, and the nearly total 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

marker, with only a loose connection to religious belief. This identification was accentuated by the combat over Nagorno-Karabakh in 1988-94, when Armenia and Azerbaijan expelled their respective Azeri Muslim and Armenian Christian minorities, creating huge refugee populations in both countries.

The death in June 1999, of the Armenian Supreme Catholicos-Patriarch Garegin I, the head of the Armenian Apostolic Church, required the election of a new church leader. Catholicos-Patriarch Garegin II was elected in October 1999 at Echmiatsin with the participation of Armenian delegates from around the world. The belief was widespread that his predecessor, although well respected, had been imposed by former President Levon Ter-Petrossian; however, the election of his successor took place without visible government interference in the election process. Some adherents of one of the candidates complained that government officials were supporting another candidate; however, President Robert Kocharian announced that they were doing so as private citizens and that the Government formally took no position for or against any candidate.

In addition to the Armenian Apostolic Church, there are comparatively small, but in many cases growing, communities of the following faiths: Yezidi (a Kurdish religious/ethnic group whose practices include elements derived from Zoroastrianism, Islam, and animism), with some 50,000 to 60,000 nominal adherents); Catholic--both Roman Catholic and Mekhitarist (Armenian Uniate), with approximately 180,000; Pentecostal (approximately 25,000); Armenian Evangelical Church (approximately 5,000); Greek Orthodox (approximately 6,000); Baptist (2,000); Jehovah's Witnesses; charismatic Christian; Seventh-Day Adventist; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormon); Jewish (500 to 1,000); Muslim; Baha'i; Hare Krishna; and pagan. Yezidis are concentrated mostly in agricultural areas around Mount Aragats, northwest of Yerevan. Catholics and Greek Orthodox 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, many of whose members live in the Abovian region; a small group of Muslims of Azeri descent, mostly along the eastern or northern borders; and approximately 1,000 Muslims in Yerevan, including Kurds, Iranians, and temporary residents from the Middle East.

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

During the period covered by this report, most registered religious groups reported no serious consequences from their activity as a result of the laws regarding religion. Although religious personnel require prior government permission to travel abroad, there is in practice no restriction on travel within the country. Although the law prohibits proselytizing, no action has been taken against missionaries; however, the State Council on Religious Affairs allows some less established groups such as the Mormons to have only a limited number of official missionaries present in the country. Such groups also avoid high-profile events.

The ban on foreign funding has not been enforced and is considered unenforceable by the State Council on Religious Affairs. Members of the Council report such limited resources that they can accomplish very little apart from annual reregistration of existing groups. No registered religious groups have been denied reregistration under the amended law. All existing denominations have been reregistered annually except the Hare Krishnas, whose numbers by 1998 had dropped below even the previous membership threshold of 50.

The State Council on Religious Affairs continued to deny registration to Jehovah's Witnesses during the period covered by this report. A regional leader of Jehovah's Witnesses held meetings with the Council on Religious Affairs in September 1999, which he described as "encouraging," but there was no change in the denial of registration. The President's Human Rights Commission declined to intervene, recommending that Jehovah's Witnesses challenge their denial of registration through the courts, as provided by law. Although Jehovah's Witnesses officials claimed that they had filed such a legal challenge, it had not been heard by the courts by mid-2000. An assembly of Jehovah's Witnesses approved slight changes to their charter 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, for example, opposition to military service. Although it had argued previously that the denial was because the group was opposed to military service, the Council on Religious Affairs stated when it denied a further application in May 2000 that the group could not be registered because they practice "illegal proselytism." Discussions between Jehovah's Witnesses and the Council were continuing as of mid-2000.

According to the 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 who are willing to rent them facilities frequently are visited by police and warned not to do so. Lack of official visa sponsorship means that Jehovah's Witnesses visitors must pay for a tourist visa. When shipped in bulk, Jehovah's Witnesses publications are seized at the border. Although members of the church supposedly are allowed to bring in small quantities of printed materials for their own use, Jehovah's Witnesses officials reported that mail from one congregation to another, which they said was meant for internal purposes rather than for proselytizing, was still confiscated by overzealous customs officials. Despite these legal obstacles, Jehovah's Witnesses continue their missionary work fairly visibly and reported a gain in membership during 1999.

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. The Council has yet to

play this role; for example, according to Jehovah's Witnesses officials, Council representatives have met with them but have refused to intervene in the group's efforts to win registration.

Governmental Abuses of Religious Freedom

Police curtailed a Jehovah's Witnesses convention held in September 1999 at a privately owned, rented facility outside Yerevan and attempted to disperse the meeting nonviolently, citing an alleged decree by the National Security Council; however, they were unable to produce such a decree, and an official of the Council on Religious Affairs stated that it had not authorized dispersal of the meeting and was not aware of the decree. The police left without dispersing the meeting, but shortly thereafter electrical power to the building was interrupted. Jehovah's Witnesses ended their meeting prematurely but peacefully. No agency admitted responsibility for the power interruption.

In April 2000, police observed, but did not intervene to halt, physical assaults on members of Jehovah's Witnesses by local toughs (see Section II).

There are reports that hazing of new conscripts, a problem throughout the former Soviet Union, 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.

As of April 30, 2000, nine members of Jehovah's Witnesses were in prison charged with draft evasion or, if forcibly drafted, with desertion due to refusal to serve, and nine more were free on probation. One more was in detention pending trial, another had been released because of illness, and the President had pardoned a third. A group estimated by an official of Jehovah's Witnesses as numbering approximately 40 reportedly was in hiding from draft officials. Alternative nonmilitary service is sometimes available for persons willing to act as teachers in remote villages, an option not offered to Jehovah's Witnesses. At least one member of Jehovah's Witnesses detained for draft evasion during 1999 indicated in writing his willingness to perform alternative service. A Jehovah's Witnesses official noted that some forms of alternative service would be problematic for members of his group, due to its creed's prohibition against participation in some government organs. There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners, apart from Jehovah's Witnesses who were conscientious objectors.

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Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

There were 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.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

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. Relations between foreign-based religious groups and the dominant Armenian Apostolic Church also are 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. In connection with the 1700th anniversary of Armenian Christianity in September 2001, the office of the Catholicos/Patriarch has announced that world religious leaders, including Pope John Paul II and the Patriarch of Moscow, will be invited to attend the dedication of a new Cathedral of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Yerevan.

Although these activities are contributing to mutual understanding, they take place in an undercurrent of competition. After 70 years of Soviet rule, the Armenian Apostolic Church has neither the trained priests nor the material resources available to fill immediately the spiritual void created by the demise of Communist ideology. Newer religious organizations are viewed with suspicion, and foreign-based denominations feel the need to operate cautiously due to fear of being perceived as a threat by the Armenian Apostolic Church. Upon his election in October 1999, one of the first actions of Catholicos-Patriarch Garegin II (formerly Archbishop of Yerevan) was to create a department for outreach to other Christian denominations.

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

There were some instances of societal violence against minority religious groups during the period covered by this report. Yezidi children on occasion report hazing by teachers and classmates. In April 2000, Jehovah's Witnesses returning from a religious service in Yerevan reported being abused verbally and in some cases assaulted physically by local toughs while police observed but did not intervene. There are reports of increasingly unfavorable attitudes towards Jehovah's Witnesses among ordinary citizens, both because they are seen as "unpatriotic" for refusing military service and because of a widespread but unsubstantiated belief that they pay money to persons who are extremely poor in exchange for their conversions. The press reported a

number of complaints lodged by citizens against Jehovah's Witnesses for alleged illegal proselytizing. They are the target of religious tracts and hostile preaching by some Armenian Apostolic Church clerics.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government is engaged actively in promoting freedom of religion. The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officials maintain close contact with the Catholicosate at Echmiatsin and with leaders of other major religious and ecumenical groups. In September 1999, Embassy officials met with the military prosecutor to discuss, among other topics, hazing of minority conscripts and the status of Jehovah's Witnesses. The Embassy also maintains regular contact with traveling regional representatives of foreign-based religious groups like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses and raises their concerns with government officials.

In Washington, State Department officials from the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor met with representatives of the Armenian government to discuss human rights, including religious freedom.

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