

U.S. Department of State
Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999:
Armenia

Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
Washington, DC, September 9, 1999

ARMENIA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

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 1991 Law on Freedom of Conscience, amended in 1997, establishes the separation of church and state but grants the Armenian Apostolic Church 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A presidential decree issued in 1993, later superceded by the 1997 law, supplemented the 1991 law and strengthened the position of the Armenian Apostolic Church.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 in the period covered by this report. A religious organization that has been refused registration cannot 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.

The Armenian Apostolic Church is not subject to some restrictions on religious freedom imposed on members of other faiths. In particular, the 1991 law forbids "proselytizing" (undefined in the law) except by the 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." The 1997 amendments tightened registration requirements by raising the minimum number of adult members required to qualify for registration from 50 to 200. The number of registered religious organizations increased to 48 as of June 30, 1999 and included the Pentecostals. The law bans foreign funding for foreign-based churches. The law also mandates that religious organizations other than the 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.

Some 90 percent of citizens nominally belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, an Eastern Christian denomination whose spiritual center is the cathedral of Echmiatsin, seat of the Armenian Supreme

Catholicos. Religious observance was discouraged strongly in Soviet times, leading to a sharp decline in the number of active churches and priests and 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 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 addition to the Apostolic Church, there are comparatively small but in many cases growing communities of the following faiths: Yezidi (a Kurdish religious/ethnic group whose practices derive from Muslim and Zoroastrian roots, with some 30-60,000 nominal adherents); Catholic, both Roman and Mekhitarist; Pentecostal (approximately 25,000); Armenian Evangelical Church (approximately 5,000); Jehovah's Witnesses; Baptist (2,000); Charismatic Christian; Seventh-Day Adventist; the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormon); Jewish (500); Baha'i; and Hare Krishna. Catholics are concentrated in the northern region of Armenia, while most Jews, Mormons and Baha'is are concentrated in Yerevan. There is a remnant Muslim Kurdish community of a few hundred, many of them in the Abovian region, and in Yerevan there are a few thousand Muslims, including Kurds, Iranians, and temporary residents from the Middle East.

As of June 30, 1999, established religious groups had reported no Government actions against them as a consequence of the law. In practice there has been no restriction on travel by religious personnel. No action has been taken against missionaries. However, a consequence has been that some less established groups, including the Mormons, informally limit the number of missionaries in country at any given time and avoid high profile events. The ban on foreign funding has not been enforced and is considered unenforceable by the Council on Religious Affairs.

All denominations previously registered have reregistered successfully except the Hare Krishnas, whose numbers dropped below even the previous 50 member threshold and hence did not seek to reregister. A few additional organizations registered with the State Council on Religious Affairs; in some instances these were groups created after splits in previous organizations. One new religious group, the Pentecostals, was registered. The number of registered religious organizations totaled 48 as of June 30, 1999.

The Council continues to deny registration to Jehovah's Witnesses, which had been rejected under the earlier version of the law. Previously the basis asserted was that the group was opposed to military service. The Council now states that the group cannot be registered because illegal proselytizing is allegedly integral to its activity. The President's Human Rights Commission declined to intervene, recommending that Jehovah's Witnesses challenge the group's nonregistration through the courts, as provided by law. However, they had not done so as of the end of the period covered by this report. As of June 30, 1999, six members of Jehovah's Witnesses were in detention and a seventh was free on probation. They were charged with draft evasion or, if forcibly drafted, with desertion. Another 20 were reportedly in hiding from the draft. Alternative nonmilitary service is sometimes available to persons willing to act as teachers in remote villages, an option not offered to members of Jehovah's Witnesses.

As a result of their unregistered status, Jehovah's Witnesses have difficulty renting meeting places; lack of official visa sponsorship means that a Jehovah's Witnesses' visitor must pay for a tourist visa. When shipped in bulk, Jehovah's Witnesses' publications are seized at the border, though members of the church are allowed to bring in small quantities of printed materials for their own use. Despite these obstacles, Jehovah's Witnesses continue their missionary work fairly visibly.

With the exception of Jehovah's Witnesses, the Government has taken a hands-off attitude toward religious groups, with perhaps a slight increase in tolerance for foreign-based religious groups since mid-1998. Overall, however, there has been no significant change in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Most problems emanate from elements within the Armenian Apostolic Church and their supporters in the middle ranks of the bureaucracy.

In July 1998, President Robert 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.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners apart from Jehovah's Witnesses who are conscientious objectors.

There were no reports of 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, and major Protestant churches. Relations between certain religious groups, including the Mekhitarist Catholic Order, the Methodists, and the dominant Armenian Apostolic Church are also strengthened through cooperation in assistance projects. Various registered Christian humanitarian organizations, including the United Methodist Committee on Relief, the Armenian-Georgian-American Partnership Endeavor, and the Mekhitarist Cultural Center are working with the Armenian Apostolic Church to distribute humanitarian assistance and educational religious materials. Although these activities contribute to mutual understanding, they take place amid an undercurrent of competition. After 70 years of Soviet rule, the Armenian Apostolic Church has neither the trained priests nor the material resources available immediately to meet the spiritual needs of the populace. Newer religious organizations are viewed with suspicion, and foreign-based denominations feel the need to operate cautiously for fear of being seen as a threat by the Armenian Apostolic Church. In this regard, the 1998 visit of President Kocharian to Utah in the United States and his meeting with the leadership of the Mormon Church had a positive impact on social attitudes in Armenia.

Societal attitudes toward minority religions are ambivalent. Many Armenians are not observant religiously, but the link between religion and Armenian ethnicity is strong. As a result of the Karabakh conflict with Azerbaijan, almost all of Armenia's Muslim population was forced to leave the country. Antipathy toward Muslims remains a serious problem, despite generally amicable relations with Iran.

There is no mosque that operates formally, though Yerevan's one surviving 18th century mosque--newly restored with Iranian funding--is open for prayers on a tenuous legal basis.

There was no violence reported against minority religious groups during the period, though the press reported a number of complaints lodged against Jehovah's Witnesses for alleged proselytizing. A leading Armenian Apostolic Church cleric published a virulent press attack on Jehovah's Witnesses in September 1998, calling them servants of the Anti-Christ. They are the target of religious tracts and hostile preaching. Alternative nonmilitary service is sometimes available for persons willing to act as teachers in remote villages, an option not offered to Jehovah's Witnesses (see Section I).

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 harsher treatment, because their refusal to serve in the military is seen as a threat to national survival. Though difficult to document, it is likely that there is some informal societal discrimination in employment against members of certain foreign-based religious groups.

Some other religious groups previously have been accused of proselytizing, including using material inducements or offers of emigration to entice converts. A relatively high percentage of members of some of these religious groups, particularly Hare Krishnas but evangelical Christians as well, joined the wave of emigration from the country for social, economic and philosophical reasons. Despite the previous Government's pledge to apprehend those alleged "Yerkrapah" members who staged a series of destructive attacks against a dozen religious groups in 1995, the authorities took no steps during the period covered by this report to bring the perpetrators to justice, although there has been no repetition of such attacks.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government is engaged actively in promoting freedom of religion in Armenia. The U.S. Embassy maintains regular close contact with leaders of major religious and ecumenical groups in Armenia and met with all major denominations during the period covered by this report. Embassy representatives intervened with the Minister of Justice, Prime Minister, and Chairman of the State Council on Religious affairs in 1998 to overcome obstacles to registration of one religiously-affiliated relief agency. Embassy officials met with the chairman of the President's Human Rights Commission and the military prosecutor on the issue of Jehovah's Witnesses. In 1997 the Ambassador intervened with the President and Speaker of the National Assembly, contributing to the elimination or softening of certain discriminatory amendments to the Law on the Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Organizations, which regulates the freedom of religion.

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