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2016 Report on International Religious Freedom - Armenia

Executive Summary

The constitution grants everyone the rights of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. In establishing freedom of worship, the constitution stipulates the separation of religious organizations and the state. It recognizes the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) as the national church and preserver of national identity. Christian minority religious groups had the freedom to worship, but some Christians said they needed to practice their religion discreetly. A Vanadzor city council member from the Renaissance Party and a group of his supporters physically attacked the pastor of an evangelical church, reportedly for refusing to promote their political party. Evangelical Christian groups reported they had given up requesting permission for their pastors to visit prisoners due to repeated denials by the authorities. According to a number of religious groups, representatives from local governments continued to obstruct their attempts to construct new houses of worship. Human rights activists continued to express concern over the government's concurrence with the AAC's dissemination in schools of its doctrine equating AAC affiliation with the national identity. According to minority religious groups and NGOs, government rhetoric equating national identity to affiliation with the AAC continued to fuel discrimination against religious organizations other than the AAC.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported they registered 17 cases of physical/verbal harassment during the year, compared with 33 such cases in 2015; they attributed the decrease to prompt police action to stop such incidents. According to Christian minority religious groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the media in general were less critical of minority religious groups than in previous years, although some media outlets continued to broadcast what the groups said was unverified and biased information about religious minorities. In September a private television channel broadcast a story linking The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) to the alleged sexual assault of a minor.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy officers continued to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials. Embassy officers met with AAC leaders to engage the AAC in supporting the rights of religious minorities to practice their faiths without restrictions. Embassy officers met with minority religious groups to discuss the problems they continued to face in obtaining permits to construct houses of worship, as well as their continuing concerns about discrimination in public sector employment, about the religion courses taught in the country's schools, and about unequal treatment and discrimination in society.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.1 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2011 census, approximately 92 percent of the population identifies with the AAC. Other religious groups, none supported by more than 1 percent of the population, include Roman Catholics, Armenian Uniate (Mekhitarist) Catholics, Orthodox Christians, evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, charismatic Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, pagans, Molokan Christians, Yezidis, Jews, Shia Muslims, and Sunni Muslims.

Yezidis are concentrated primarily in agricultural areas northwest of Yerevan around Mount Aragats, and Armenian Uniate Catholics live primarily in the north. Most Jews, Mormons, and Orthodox Christians reside in Yerevan, along with a small community of Muslims, most of whom are Shia, including Iranians and temporary residents from the Middle East.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. This right includes the freedom to change one's religion or beliefs and the freedom to manifest religion or belief in rituals of worship, such as preaching or church ceremonies, either alone or in community with others, in public or in private. The constitution allows restrictions on this right only in order to protect state security, public order, health and morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. The constitution establishes separation of "religious organizations" and the state. It recognizes "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 constitution prohibits the exercise of fundamental rights and freedoms for the purpose of inciting religious hatred. It allows conscientious objectors to military service to perform alternative civilian service.

The law prohibits, but does not define, "soul hunting," a term describing both proselytism and forced conversion.

According to the law, a registered religious group may exercise the following rights: to minister to the religious and spiritual needs of their faithful; to perform religious liturgies, rites, and ceremonies; to establish groups for religious instruction; to engage in theological, religious, and historical and cultural studies; to train members for clergy or for scientific and pedagogical purposes; to obtain and utilize objects and materials of religious significance; to use communications media; to establish ties with religious organizations in other countries; and to engage in charity. The law does not require religious groups to register, but in order for a religious group to conduct business in its own name (e.g., own property, rent property, establish bank accounts), it must register. The law does not stipulate the rights accorded to unregistered groups.

In order to register as a legal entity, a religious community has to present to the Office of the State Registrar an assessment from the Division of Religious Affairs and National Minorities stating its expert opinion whether the community complies with the requirements of the law that it be based on "historically recognized holy scripture;" be "free from materialism and is of a spiritual nature;" have at least 200 adult members; and its doctrine be espoused by a member of the "international modern system" of religious communities. The law does not define "free from materialism" or state which religious communities are considered to be part of the "international modern system." The law specifies this list of registration requirements, to which the Division of Religious Affairs must attest, does not apply to a religious organization based on the faith of one of the groups recognized as national minorities. A decision by the Office of the State Registrar may be appealed through the courts.

The criminal code prohibits "obstruction of the right to exercise freedom of religion" and prescribes punishment ranging from fines of up to 200,000 drams (\$420) or detention of up to two months.

The Human Rights Defender's office (Ombudsman's office) has a mandate to address violations of the human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion, committed by officials of the state and local governments.

The law prohibits an employee of the police, the National Security Service, the service for mandatory enforcement of court rulings, the penitentiary service, the rescue service, or the military from being a member of a religious organization. The law does not define the meaning of "membership" in a religious organization. The law prohibits the members of the police, the military, and the national security service, as well as prosecutors and other state and civil servants from using their official position for the benefit of "religious associations" or from preaching in support of them. The law also prohibits the police, prosecutors, and other state and civil servants from carrying out other religious activities while performing official duties. The law also prohibits members of the military from organizing "religious associations." While the law defines a "religious organization"

as an association of citizens established for professing a common faith as well as for fulfilling other religious needs, there is no definition for “religious associations.”

The law allows the AAC free access to, and the right to station representatives in, hospitals, orphanages, boarding schools, military units, and places of detention, while other religious groups may have representatives in these locations only upon receipt of permission from the head of the institution.

The law mandates public education be secular, and states “religious activity and preaching in public educational institutions is prohibited, with the exception of cases provided by law.” Courses on the history of the AAC are a mandatory part of the national curriculum in public and private schools in grades five through 11.

The AAC has the right to participate in the development of the syllabus and textbooks for these courses and to define the qualifications of their teachers. The Church may nominate candidates to teach the courses, although the teachers are state employees. All students are required to enroll in these classes; there is no opt-out provision. The law grants the AAC the right to organize voluntary extracurricular religious instruction classes in state educational institutions. Other religious groups may provide religious instruction to their members in their own facilities, but not within the premises of state educational institutions.

The labor code prohibits employers from collecting and analyzing data on religious views of employees.

The law provides for two types of service for conscientious objectors as an alternative to compulsory, two-year military service: alternative (noncombat) military service for a duration of 30 months or alternative labor service for a duration of 36 months. Evasion of alternative service remains a criminal offense. Penalties range from two months’ detention to eight years’ imprisonment depending on the circumstances of the case.

The law does not recognize groups organized on the basis of religion as political parties.

The criminal code prohibits incitement of religious hatred through violence, public statements, or the mass media and prescribes punishments ranging from fines of 200,000 to 500,000 drams (\$420 to \$1,000) or prison terms between two and six years.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

On October 4, media reported a member of the Vanadzor City Council, Arkadi Peleshyan, entered the Vanadzor Evangelical Church with a group of his supporters on October 2 and severely beat the church’s pastor and President of the Union of Churches of Evangelical Faith of Armenia, Rafael Grigoryan. The Investigative Committee, an independent body responsible for conducting pretrial investigations, launched an investigation into whether Peleshyan should be formally charged with battery. According to public statements by Grigoryan, the assault was related to his refusal to allow the distribution of promotional materials for Peleshyan’s political party during Sunday services. The website *Protestant.am*, a media initiative of Evangelical Christians, issued a statement on October 5 condemning the attack and stating it was caused by “the air of impunity, hate speech and intolerance spread by media toward Christians of evangelical faith.” On November 8, the Investigative Committee suspended the case following a reconciliation between Grigoryan and Peleshyan after the latter made a public apology for the attack.

Some minority Christian groups reported they had the freedom to worship provided they did so discreetly and limited their activities to their own premises and community. They said attempting to expand beyond those premises or attempting to expand their existing membership through proselytizing could potentially create problems. For this reason, the groups said, they kept their activities low profile and exercised self-censorship.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses said they continued to pursue legal avenues for the protection of their rights and tried to maintain a dialogue with the government. They reported they received more police protection while engaging in their public ministry and discerned an improved attitude on the part of government authorities toward their members. Most religious groups, however, said they preferred to solve their issues off the record to avoid the possibility of further problems.

Evangelical Christian groups reported they had given up requesting permission for their pastors to visit prisoners, despite requests by prison inmates, because prison administrators had repeatedly denied them permission for such visits in the last several years.

According to several religious groups, representatives from local governments continued to obstruct their attempts to obtain approval of the required architectural planning studies and building and occupancy permits for houses of worship on land religious groups owned. Representatives of several minority faiths continued to report local authorities granted building permits for places of worship only after receiving informal approval from the leadership of the AAC. Some religious groups said they were more successful in obtaining building permits

if they did so using the name of a private individual, or if the stated purpose in applying for the permit was to use the building for a purpose other than as a place of worship. Other groups reported rather than try to build new places of worship, they obtained existing buildings and renovated them for this purpose.

A Yezidi group reported local authorities in the village of Jrashen refused its request to build a monument to a Yezidi leader in the town square. According to the Yezidi group, while no written rejection was provided, the reason for the refusal was the possibility of constructing an AAC church in the same square at some time in the future and the AAC's desire not to have a Yezidi monument with religious symbolism near an AAC church.

Human rights activists continued to express concern over the government's integration of the AAC into the public education system and its granting of permission to the AAC to disseminate materials in schools with rhetoric equating AAC affiliation with the national identity.

According to a report on religious freedom in the country issued in March by the Collaboration for Democracy, a local NGO, the public educational system curriculum promoted the identification of the Armenian ethnic identity with the AAC, for example in the 10th grade textbook for the course on the History of the Armenian Church, which stated the AAC turned faith into one of the most important features of the national identity. According to the NGO, other classes, such as those on the Armenian language, history and literature, also contained elements equating national identity to affiliation with the AAC. According to the report, there were other problems with the course on the History of the Armenian Church, including hate speech towards religious organizations other than the AAC, the performance of AAC religious rituals during classes, and the lack of opportunities to take an alternative course.

Yezidi community representatives continued to report their dissatisfaction with the mandatory AAC history course, which they said was religious indoctrination. NGOs, religious organizations, atheists, and non-practicing members of the AAC publicly voiced similar concerns. There were reports of some AAC clergy teaching this course, and making visits to AAC churches part of the course, without providing opportunities for discussion of other faiths or for students to visit non-AAC religious sites. According to media reports, AAC clergy also visited state-funded kindergartens, including during celebrations of AAC holidays, and organized visits of kindergarten classes to AAC churches.

Following public criticism and international attention focused on the AAC's role in education, observers reported the AAC had instructed the teachers of the ACC history course to be more respectful of the religious views of students. Observers stated teachers appeared to follow this guidance and made fewer negative comments about other religions, although conducting prayers during the AAC history course remained common. Most minority religious groups did not report complaints from their members about discriminatory treatment of students by teachers of the AAC history course. Some groups reported a few cases in which teachers made negative comments about the religious views of students. When this did occur, the groups reported the parents usually were able to resolve the issue by speaking with the teacher or the principal of the school. Such cases were more likely to occur in rural areas than in Yerevan, the groups said.

According to a February 1 article posted on *Medialab.am*, an academic expert on religious matters stated the required course on the History of the Armenian Church contravened the freedom of religion and forced students and their parents to hide their religious affiliations to avoid ridicule. In response, the site reported, then Minister of Education and Science Armen Ashotyan stated the basis for the required course was the provision of the constitution recognizing the AAC as the national church and the preserver of national identity. In a February 19 interview with the *Irates* newspaper about the required course, Deputy Minister of Education Manouk Mkrtychyan stated patriotism involved "preserving and especially protecting the characteristics specific to the homeland," which he said included the Armenian Apostolic faith as a part of the motherland – "the essence of our nation."

Based on a pilot program launched in 2012 by the Ministry of Education, school administrations had the option to include a different course, entitled History of the AAC/Christian Education, in their curriculum for grades two through four. Once a school chose this option, the course became mandatory for the students in those grades. During the year 83 schools throughout the country followed this option.

According to media reports, on August 26, the new Minister of Education and Science, Levon Mkrtychyan, visited the Lori region to hold consultations with the teachers and principals of public schools. At the suggestion of the Primate of the Diocese of Gougark, Archbishop Sepouh Chuljian, the meeting began with a prayer from the AAC liturgy.

According to various religious groups and NGOs that advocated for religious tolerance, government rhetoric equating national identity to affiliation with the AAC continued to fuel discrimination against religious organizations other than the AAC.

Religious groups affiliated with ethnic minorities, such as Apostolic Assyrians, continued to report better relations with government institutions than did other minority religious groups whose members included ethnic Armenians.

In its March 9 report, the Collaboration for Democracy stated it had found discrimination and dismissals in government, public educational institutions and the military due to religious affiliation. According to the NGO, the government used provisions of the law prohibiting membership of law-enforcement employees and other public service employees in religious organizations, to limit the rights of those employees. The NGO reported the government interpreted the provisions prohibiting membership in religious organizations to mean affiliation with any religious group other than the AAC was prohibited. According to several minority religious groups, public employees and members of law enforcement agencies either chose not to attend religious services or kept their attendance hidden, fearing they might lose their jobs. Another group, however, reported it had government employee members who did not hide their religious membership and had suffered no repercussions. According to a Yezidi group, Yezidis faced discrimination during military service such as being prohibited from serving in the intelligence forces due to their religious and ethnic identity. According to the group, AAC chaplains forced Yezidi servicemen to pray during AAC religious services.

Several minority religious groups reported their members preferred not to publicize their religious affiliation while in military service, although conscripts continued to be required to declare their religion when beginning their service. The government continued to allow only AAC clergy to serve in the army's chaplaincy program.

The Word of Life evangelical church reported the appeal by a member of the church to rejoin the army was denied by the military in September. The church member had been forced to resign from the army due to her religious beliefs in November 2015. In denying her appeal, the Chief of the Department of the Administrative Apparatus of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, General Major Aris Brutyan, stated in a letter "according to the requirements of the Law on Starting Military Service... a military serviceperson is prohibited from becoming a member of any political party, religious or trade union." The letter further stated "according to the position of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Word of Life is a charismatic movement, which has typical totalitarian and destructive attributes, and as a destructive religious movement, it represents a public and national threat." As of year's end, the Word of Life church was working with the Office of the Human Rights Defender to try to help the individual regain her military position.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported 17 of their members completed alternative civilian service for conscientious objection by the end of the year. As of November, the most recent date for which data was available, 207 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses had participated in the alternative civilian service program since the legal reform of the program in 2013, according to leaders of the community. They said the state committee responsible for coordinating and reviewing the applications for alternative service continued to be cooperative, and the program worked well. The group also stated society as a whole responded positively to their members carrying out alternative civilian service.

The Collaboration for Democracy also reported the government tolerated the spreading of hate speech, and the dissemination of defamatory and inaccurate information about minority religious groups, through public and private TV broadcasts without taking any steps to curb or punish it. The NGO additionally reported the government hindered the charitable activities of minority religious groups, although without providing specifics.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On September 23, the private ATV television channel broadcast a story about the alleged sexual assault of a minor whose family belonged to the Mormon Church. During the program, a purported guest expert, known for his rhetoric against religious minorities, presented additional material that he claimed substantiated a link between the Mormon Church and the assault.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, during the year there were 17 incidents of physical and verbal harassment of their members while they were engaging in their public ministry, a decline from 33 such incidents in the previous year. In one case, literature carts used by the Jehovah's Witnesses were overturned with minor damage. Following a prompt response from police officers on duty in the area, the group reported, the offenders did not interfere with the group's activity again.

According to minority Christian groups and NGOs, the media in general were less critical of minority religious groups than in previous years, although some media outlets continued to label minority religious groups as "sects" and broadcast what the groups said was unverified and biased information about religious minorities. At the same time, the groups said it was possible to find articles, especially in online media, covering religious issues in an unbiased manner and presenting different perspectives. The Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, stated they welcomed what they perceived to be an increased atmosphere of religious tolerance on the part of officials and the public.

According to one minority Christian group, some journalists, especially on television media outlets, avoided positive coverage of minorities due to fear of reprimand from the station ownership.

On November 9, the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF), a local NGO, held its second Annual Media Award Ceremony for the best coverage of issues related to the freedom of religion or belief. The ceremony was a part of EPF's program to promote religious tolerance and non-discrimination and was implemented with the support of the Dutch government. Fourteen printed articles, 12 caricatures and 3 videos were nominated for the award. According to human rights NGOs, the EPF initiative had a positive impact on media coverage of religious issues.

During his June visit to the country, Pope Francis met with the supreme head of the AAC, Catholicos Garegin II, and other AAC leaders and praised the AAC for the maintenance of Christian identity within the country.

Construction continued on what the media called the world's largest Yezidi temple on a site in the small village of Aknalich, with the intention of establishing it as the "spiritual center" for the country's Yezidis.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador and embassy officers continued to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials. Embassy officers met with a representative of the Ministry of Defense to discuss religious tolerance in the army and the legal restrictions against members of religious groups joining the military. The Ambassador regularly brought together representatives of the government, the office of the Human Rights Defender, and religious minorities to discuss problems of discrimination faced by religious minorities, to foster a dialogue between the government and the religious groups, and to explore cooperative solutions to those problems.

The Ambassador met with leaders of the AAC to engage them in supporting the rights of religious minorities to practice their faiths without restrictions. On April 1, the Ambassador and embassy officers attended the New Year's celebrations of Apostolic Assyrians in the village of Verin Dvin in the Ararat region to promote religious diversity and tolerance.

Embassy officers continued to meet with representatives of religious and ethnic/religious minorities, including Catholics, evangelicals and other Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Yezidis, Apostolic Assyrians, and Jews, to discuss restrictions on their ability to practice their respective faiths and difficulties they faced obtaining permits to construct houses of worship. On October 20, embassy officers met with pastor Grigoryan and issued a statement condemning the violence against him. Embassy officers also continued to meet with civil society groups to discuss their concerns over the AAC history courses taught in the country's schools and discrimination against religious minorities in society. Embassy officers participated in the EPF Annual Media Award jury and the ceremony to support religious tolerance in the media.