

ARMENIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution protects religious freedom; however, some laws and policies restrict religious freedom. There were reports of abuses of religious freedom. The law grants privileges to the Armenian Apostolic Church not available to other religious groups. Most registered religious groups reported no significant legal impediments to their activities. However, according to the Jehovah's Witnesses, 31 members remained in prison for refusing on religious grounds to perform mandatory military or alternative labor service. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Members of minority religious groups experienced societal discrimination and intolerance, including in the workplace. Many media outlets demonstrated bias against minority religious groups.

U.S. embassy officials promoted religious freedom and interfaith dialogue publicly and during meetings with government officials, and maintained close contact with religious leaders. The embassy urged the government to adopt a new law on alternative service for conscientious objectors that complied with international standards.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to preliminary results of the 2011 census, the population is 2.8 million. Approximately 90 percent of citizens belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Other religious groups constituting less than 5 percent each of the total population include Roman Catholics, Armenian Uniate (Mekhitarist) Catholics, Orthodox Christians, evangelical Christians, Molokans, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, charismatic Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Yezidis, Jews, Sunni Muslims, Shiite Muslims, and pagans.

Yezidis are concentrated primarily in agricultural areas northwest of Yerevan around Mount Aragats, and Armenian 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 Shiites, including Iranians and temporary residents from the Middle East.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution protects religious freedom; however, some laws and policies restrict religious freedom.

The law governing religious groups does not explicitly mandate registration of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), but only registered groups have legal status. Unregistered groups may not publish more than 1,000 copies of newspapers or magazines, rent meeting places, broadcast programs on television or radio, or officially sponsor visitors' visas, although individual members may do so. To qualify for registration, religious groups must "be free from materialism and of a purely spiritual nature," have at least 200 adult members, and subscribe to a doctrine based on "historically recognized holy scriptures." The registration requirements do not apply to the religious groups associated with national ethnic minorities, although most have chosen to register. The Office of the State Registrar registers religious groups. The Department of Religious Affairs and National Minorities oversees religious affairs and consults in the registration process.

The constitution and the law establish separation of church and state, but recognize "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 law grants privileges to the Armenian Apostolic Church not available to other religious groups. For example, the church may have permanent representatives in hospitals, orphanages, boarding schools, military units, and places of detention, while other religious groups may have representatives in these places only upon request.

The law prohibits but does not define "soul hunting," a term describing both proselytism and forced conversion. The prohibition applies to all religious groups, including the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The law mandates that public education be secular. However, courses in the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church are part of the public school curriculum and are taught by public school teachers. The church has the right to participate in

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the development of the syllabus and textbooks for this course and to define the qualifications of its teachers. The church may also nominate candidates to teach the course. The class is mandatory; students are not permitted to opt out of the course, and no alternatives are available to students of other religious groups. In addition, the law grants the Armenian Apostolic Church the right to organize voluntary extracurricular religious classes in state educational institutions. Other religious groups may provide religious instruction to members in their own facilities.

The law allows conscientious objectors, subject to government approval, to perform either noncombatant military service for 36 months or labor service for 42 months rather than serve as combat-trained military personnel for two years. The law also criminalizes evasion of alternative labor service.

The criminal code prohibits incitement of national, racial, or religious hatred.

The law prohibits foreign funding of foreign-based denominations.

The government observes January 6, the day on which the Armenian Apostolic Church celebrates Christmas, as a national holiday. During the year the government designates five church observances as official Monday holidays. It designates the preceding or following Saturdays as workdays.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, including detention. Most registered religious groups reported no significant legal impediments to their activities.

Many conscientious objectors regarded military control of the alternative labor service as unacceptable. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, eight Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted for evasion of military and alternative service and were serving time in prison. Four of the eight received sentences of 24 months in prison, and the remaining four received sentences of 30 months. Fifteen Jehovah's Witnesses were convicted and received either 24- or 30-month sentences, but remained free pending the outcomes of their appeals. Additionally, 17 Jehovah's Witnesses were under investigation on similar charges, and cases against nine were ongoing in trial courts. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, at year's end, 31 members remained in prison for refusing on religious grounds to perform mandatory military or alternative labor service under Ministry of Defense auspices.

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The government exempted 20 Armenian Apostolic Church clergy members from mandatory military service and deferred the service obligation of 85 church seminarians.

On January 16, an appeals court confirmed the conviction of Jehovah's Witness Andranik Makvetsyan for preventing an Armenian Apostolic Church priest's "right to preach" near a church and violating the priest's "right to prevent" Makvetsyan from proselytizing. Observers reported that such rights do not exist under Armenian law. Makvetsyan served a six-month sentence and was released.

In contrast to previous years, Jehovah's Witnesses held conventions without disruption from government officials.

At a February 18 roundtable meeting with representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church, the minister of education announced that teachers of a course on the history of the Church offered in the public schools would require vetting from the Church's Mother See, which would also be in charge of their training. Reportedly, the Christian Education Center of the Mother See was already in charge of training teachers for the course.

In July the Center of Collaboration for Democracy (CCD), an NGO, published a report on religious education in public schools, concluding that the curriculum and textbook of the course on the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church focused on the belief system of the church rather than on its history. According to the report, the classes included some elements of religious rites of the church, as well as hate speech against other religious groups, and were designed to indoctrinate students. The report quoted interviews with public school principals and teachers of the class, some of whom stated the purpose of the class was to mold students into "correct" Christians, keep them away from "sects," bring them closer to the Armenian Apostolic Church, and teach them that other religions divide the nation.

On July 31, a trial court rejected the libel and defamation suit of the Word of Life Church and its senior pastor Artur Simonyan against two periodicals, *Iravunk Hetaqnutyun* and *Argumenti Nedeli v Armenii*, and ordered the co-plaintiffs to pay AMD 300,000 (\$739) for the periodicals' legal expenses. In 2011 the two periodicals published articles insinuating a connection between the church and pornography. On May 11, the Information Disputes Council, composed of independent media experts who volunteer expertise on defamation cases, issued an opinion concluding that the absence of factual data in the articles made them

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offensive, and that the repeated use of the word “sect” constituted incitement of religious hatred. On November 8, the court of appeal upheld the trial court decision and ordered the co-plaintiffs to pay an additional AMD 100,000 (\$246) for legal expenses.

On October 23, the former editor-in-chief of *Iravunk*, a current member of parliament, made statements in parliament referring to the Word of Life Church as a “totalitarian sect carrying out illegal and anti-social activities.” The newspaper maintained a link on its Web site called “Stop Word of Life.”

The government did not enforce its prohibition against foreign funding of foreign-based religious groups.

The city of Yerevan made some efforts to remove leaflets and posters denouncing religious minority groups from walls and poles throughout the city. The materials, posted by a group identifying itself as “One Nation Party” continued to re-appear, and the group reportedly distributed the leaflets in person at subway stations and residential buildings.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Members of minority religious groups reported experiencing societal discrimination and intolerance, including in the workplace, although few filed reports with the authorities. Many media outlets demonstrated bias against minority religious groups.

Many media outlets continued to label minority religious groups as “sects” and promulgated fear of religious minorities. Various television stations broadcast discussions and news coverage in which participants characterized minority religious groups as enemies of the state. Most broadcast media outlets were owned by politicians in the ruling party or politically connected businessmen. Media outlets published inaccurate articles portraying religious minorities as criminals and spies. Local observers and religious groups stated, however, that media reporting on religious minorities was less virulent than in the past.

On June 5, following a court-approved settlement, the H1 public television station issued a retraction of its 2010 reports that falsely associated a man charged with brutally murdering his elderly parents in Sevan with the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

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Some minority religious groups criticized the behavior of some Armenian Apostolic Church priests as overly aggressive. On July 31, a priest attacked Jehovah's Witnesses who were discussing the Bible in a house in the village of Ozdun. The priest reportedly gathered together a group of men who verbally harassed the Jehovah's Witnesses. When other Jehovah's Witnesses arrived to mediate, the priest took off his cross and physically assaulted them. Following police intervention, the priest apologized for his actions and expressed willingness to pay compensation for damages.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador, embassy representatives, and visiting officials promoted religious freedom and interfaith dialogue publicly and during meetings with government officials. Embassy officials continued to encourage the government to adopt a new law on alternative service for conscientious objectors that complied with international standards. In addition, embassy officials engaged with religious and civil society leaders to promote religious tolerance.