

ARMENIA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution protects religious freedom; however, some laws and policies restrict religious freedom. There were reports of obstacles faced by religious organizations in building places of worship and discrimination in schools against religious minority children. 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. In May the parliament approved changes to the alternative service law establishing civilian control over alternative labor in lieu of military service. Following these amendments the government released all Jehovah's Witnesses serving sentences for refusing on religious grounds to perform mandatory military or alternative labor service.

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 maintained close contact with religious leaders and promoted religious freedom and interfaith dialogue publicly and during meetings with government officials. The embassy sponsored two conferences devoted to the discussion of state and church relations, and funded speakers on these issues. The embassy also supported a visitor program designed to foster understanding of tolerance and diversity.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the latest 2011 population census results, approximately 92 percent of the population identify themselves as affiliated with 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, Shia Muslims, pagans, and others.

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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 Shia, including Iranians and temporary residents from the Middle East.

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 by providing special privileges only to the Armenian Apostolic Church and limiting certain rights of minority religious groups, including their ability to obtain building permits for the construction of churches and other religious centers.

The law governing religious groups does not explicitly mandate registration of religious groups, 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, and 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.

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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. Courses in the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church, however, are part of the public school curriculum and are taught by public school teachers. The church has the right to participate in 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.

In May the government approved changes to the alternative service law that institute civilian control over the alternative labor service, one of the two available types of alternatives to military service. The amendments reduce the duration of alternative (non-combat) military service from 36 to 30 months, and the alternative labor service from 42 to 36 months. Evasion of alternative service remains a criminal offense.

The criminal code prohibits incitement of religious hatred.

The law prohibits foreign funding of foreign-based denominations. The government does not enforce this prohibition.

Government Practices

Government restrictions affected some minority religious groups, although most registered religious groups reported no significant legal impediments to their activities. The government exempted 20 Armenian Apostolic Church clergy members from mandatory military service and deferred the service obligation of 58 church seminarians.

There were reports of obstacles faced by religious organizations in building places of worship. In February the Yerevan mayor’s office refused to permit Jehovah’s Witnesses to build three places of worship, stating that building places of worship in “inhabited areas” led to complaints from neighbors. The organization appealed

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the decision in court as arbitrary and discriminatory. There were reports of other minority religious groups, or those perceived as a religious group (e.g., those practicing yoga) having difficulties with renting space for gatherings.

Human rights observers broadly discussed the growing presence of the Armenian Apostolic Church in public education. The church's Christian Education Center of the Mother See had a primary role in developing and approving the textbooks and vetting the teachers of a course on the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church offered in the public schools.

In July 2012, the Center of Collaboration for Democracy (CCD), a nongovernmental organization (NGO), published a report on religious education in public schools, concluding that the curriculum and textbook for 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. There were reports during the year of mandatory visits to churches during class hours and reports of religious rites performed in public kindergartens.

The Council of Europe commissioned a study of the rights of children of ethnic and religious minorities. It identified public schools as the place where discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes of children of religious minorities were formed. The study cited numerous reports that teachers and principals discriminated against religious minority children. According to the study, teachers of the course on the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church customarily inquired about the religious affiliation of students at the beginning of the year, thus singling out the children of religious minorities and creating potential problems with their peers. The study also found that some teachers of this course started their classes with prayers.

On April 18, the website "Freedom of Religion" reported the February 28 dismissal of Armine Davtyan, a professor at the Armenian State Pedagogical University. Davtyan claimed that she had been dismissed on religious grounds following the rejection of her doctoral thesis on peculiarities of spiritual education in high schools. According to the media report, the university claimed she had

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been removed as a result of general layoff. Davtyan noted that, while not a member of any religious group, her views differed from those of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and this had become evident during her doctoral thesis defense. Davtyan claimed she had been dismissed for these views.

Improvements in Respect for Religious Freedom

In May the national assembly approved changes to the alternative service law, establishing civilian control over alternative labor service. Following these amendments the government released all Jehovah's Witnesses serving sentences for refusing on religious grounds to perform mandatory military or alternative labor service. On October 8, the government released eight Jehovah's Witnesses following an October 3 general amnesty announced by the president. On October 23, the governmental commission supervising the process of alternative service held its first session and granted alternative labor service to 57 Jehovah's Witnesses who had applied for the new program. Six of the 57 had applied from prison and were released October 24. The government released the remaining 14 Jehovah's Witnesses who were in prison November 12, following the second session of the governmental commission held the same day. The conscientious objectors were assigned to non-military jobs such as orderlies, groundskeepers, or cooks in medical facilities and orphanages. The government terminated or was expected to terminate all pending criminal cases against other Jehovah's Witnesses during the next sessions of the government commission. All Jehovah's Witnesses of draft age had applied for consideration in the new program.

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 propagated fear of religious minorities. Various television stations broadcast one-sided discussions and news coverage in which participants characterized minority religious groups as enemies of the state. According to minority religious groups, those stations did not provide them with an opportunity to respond to the criticism nor to participate in television debates to present their side of the story. Most broadcast media outlets were owned by politicians in the ruling party or

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politically connected businessmen. Media outlets published inaccurate articles portraying religious minorities as criminals and spies. Many inflammatory statements did not specify a particular religious group, but instead aimed to create general intolerance toward all religious minorities. Religious groups also reported increased intolerance and threats in social networks.

On September 9, in a widely covered press conference, Armenian Apostolic Church clergy member Komitas Hovnanyan, together with the head of an organization called “United Youth League,” criticized religious minorities. According to Hovnanyan, there were more than 215 “sects” functioning in the country, which received millions of dollars from abroad and aimed to destroy Armenia.

In September Pastor Levon Bardakjian of the Yerevan Evangelical Church reported three physical attacks on his church. Media reported that on September 11, a young man carrying a bloody knife entered the premises of the Yerevan Evangelical Church looking for Bardakjian. Bardakjian also reported that on September 13, three unidentified young men tried to kidnap Bardakjian’s secretary, Judy Mussah. On September 18, Bardakjian reported that his car was fired upon near the town of Sevan, though he was not driving the car on that day. All these cases were under police investigation at year’s end; however, Bardakjian complained that police officers were slow to act and to protect him and members of his church.

On September 20, the “United Youth League” and “Menk” (We) movements against “destructive sects,” initiated a signature collection campaign calling for the government to investigate the activities of all registered and unregistered religious organizations and to ban their “destructive” influence on Armenian society. The groups called for the government immediately to stop the activities of what they referred to as the “Word of Life,” “Jehovah’s Witnesses,” “Reima,” “Altar,” and “Great Grace” “sects.”

In October the “United Youth League” published a list of pop artists, claiming that they were “sectarians.” Few of the mentioned artists defended their views or their right to privacy. Most of the artists publicly denounced “sects” and tried to prove they were members of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

A group identifying itself as the “One Nation Party” continued to post leaflets and posters denouncing religious minority groups throughout the city.

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Unlike previous years, there were no reports of physical attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador, embassy representatives, and visiting officials promoted religious freedom and interfaith dialogue publicly and during meetings with government officials. Embassy officials encouraged the government to adopt the new law on alternative service for conscientious objectors and, after its enactment, to implement it in accordance with international standards. In addition, embassy officials engaged with religious and civil society leaders to promote religious tolerance.

The embassy sponsored a two-day conference in May on "Models of Relationship between State and Church: Contemporary Tendencies" that was hosted by the Collaboration for Democracy Centre, a local NGO. The embassy invited an international speaker to serve as a keynote speaker at the conference. The speaker also lectured at the Gyumri State Pedagogical University and the American University of Armenia, gave television interviews, led two round-table discussions on religious freedom with NGOs and religious groups, and met with relevant government officials and parliamentarians.

The embassy co-funded an international symposium entitled "Church and State Relations, Possibilities and Challenges" through a grant to the World Council of Churches Armenia Round Table Foundation.

The embassy also supported a three-week visitor program to the United States for representatives of the government, media, and NGOs designed to foster understanding of tolerance, including religious tolerance, and diversity.