

ARMENIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees the freedom of religion and establishes the separation of church and state, but at the same time recognizes the Armenian Apostolic Church as the national church and preserver of the national identity. Courses on the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church are a mandatory part of the public school curriculum. Government actions affecting minority religious groups included pressuring new military conscripts to undergo baptism together into the Armenian Apostolic faith, discrimination in the army on religious grounds, obstacles to obtaining places of worship, and discrimination against religious minorities in the school system and in public sector employment. The government stated it had no intention of changing school curricula to eliminate the compulsory “History of Armenian Church” course, viewed by many local experts as indoctrinating and proselyting children. Jehovah’s Witnesses praised the government’s implementation of alternative labor service as an option for conscientious objectors pursuant to a change in the law in 2013.

Many media outlets continued to present news stories characterizing minority religious groups as “enemies of the state,” although most religious groups said, in comparison with prior years, journalists had begun to portray their activities more objectively. Several religious organizations reported improved relations with the Armenian Apostolic Church. A survey of mid-level school students found the respondents expressed highly negative attitudes towards religious organizations other than the Armenian Apostolic Church.

The U.S. Ambassador, embassy representatives, and visiting officials promoted interfaith dialogue publicly and during meetings with government officials, emphasizing that all individuals should be allowed to practice their faith without hindrance, and that members of religious minorities should not be considered a threat to the state. Embassy officials engaged with religious and civil society leaders throughout the year to promote religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.1 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the 2011 census results, approximately 92 percent of the population identifies itself as affiliated with the Armenian Apostolic Church. Other religious groups, constituting less than 5 percent each of the population,

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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, Assyrians, Jews, Sunni Muslims, Shia Muslims, and pagans.

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 guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and establishes separation of church and state. At the same time, the constitution 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 states the right of individuals to practice their religion freely may only be restricted in the interests of public security, health, or morality.

The law governing religious groups does not explicitly mandate registration of religious groups, but only registered groups have legal status. In order to register as a legal entity, a religious community or organization has to present to the Office of the State Registrar an expert opinion from the Department of Religious Affairs and National Minorities that the community or organization complies with requirements of the law that it is based on some “historically recognized holy scripture,” its doctrine is one espoused by a member of the “international modern system” of religious communities, it is “free from materialism and is of spiritual nature,” and has at least 200 adult members. The law does not define what is meant by “free from materialism” or which religious communities are considered to be part of the “international modern system.” These requirements do not apply to the religious groups associated with national ethnic minorities, such as Molokans and Yezidis.

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The law also enumerates the rights of religious organizations, which include: to minister to the religious-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. According to the law, these rights arise from the moment a religious organization is registered.

The law allows the Armenian Apostolic Church free access or 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 places only upon request. The law prohibits, but does not define, “soul hunting,” a term describing both proselytism and forced conversion.

The law mandates that public education be secular, but courses in the history of the Armenian Apostolic Church are a mandatory part of the public school curriculum from grades 5-11. The church 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 also nominate candidates to teach the courses. Students are not permitted to opt out of the courses. 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, as amended in 2013, provides for two types of service for conscientious objectors as an alternative to regular military service: alternative (non-combat) military service with a duration of 30 months or alternative labor service with a duration of 36 months. Evasion of alternative service remains a criminal offense.

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 (\$426 to \$1,064) or prison terms between two years and six years. The criminal code also prohibits obstruction of the right to exercise freedom of religion and prescribes a punishment ranging from fines up to 200,000 drams (\$426) or detention of up to two months.

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The law provides for nondiscrimination in all spheres of civic, political, public, economic, and cultural life regardless of religious affiliation or belief, but does not provide specific punishments for offenses of this nature.

Government Practices

Government actions affecting minority religious groups included baptisms of new military conscripts, discrimination in the army on religious grounds, obstacles to renting space for religious gatherings and building places of worship, and continued discrimination against religious minorities in the school system.

Religious groups reported that in several cases the Armenian Apostolic Church pressured military conscripts to undergo baptism together into the Armenian Apostolic faith. According to observers, in some cases new conscripts were reluctant to refuse to be baptized out of fear of being isolated and singled out. In other cases, army chaplains of the Armenian Apostolic Church and some, but not all, commanders were reportedly inquiring about the religious affiliation of conscripts and putting pressure on adherents of religions other than the Armenian Apostolic Church and on atheists to pray with Armenian Apostolic Church chaplains and attend religion classes. The government reportedly did not allow chaplains from other religious groups to visit the army.

On April 26, the Ministry of Defense hosted a “Scientific-Practical Conference on Destructive Sects and Vicious Street Habits as Threats to Defense Capacity.” In his opening remarks, Minister of Defense Seyran Ohanyan said for the protection of Armenia it was important that everyone believe in the same values, including in the Armenian Apostolic Church. In his concluding remarks, the minister thanked the participants for joining the struggle against “destructive sects.”

While the police protected and allowed some religious organizations, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses, to disseminate their literature in public, other groups reported the authorities arbitrarily denied them this right.

Throughout the year multiple religious groups reported difficulties with renting space for gatherings and building places of worship. According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses, representatives from local governments obstructed the group’s attempts to obtain approvals of the required architectural planning studies and building and occupancy permits for land they owned. An appeal by the Jehovah’s Witnesses of a 2013 decision by the Yerevan mayor’s office refusing permission to build three

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places of worship because of “complaints from neighbors” was ongoing. According to the Jehovah’s Witnesses and other religious groups, they were more successful in obtaining building permits if this was done under the name of private individuals, or if the building was not intended to be a church.

Religious groups and civil society representatives continued to urge the government to remove the legal gaps, unclear provisions, and contradictions in the existing legislation on religion; to guarantee freedom of conscience, religion, or belief to everyone regardless of citizenship; to recognize the freedom to change religion or belief; to guarantee the freedom to manifest religion or belief in public or private; to clarify if religious organizations were entitled to legal personality and had access to it; and to make more precise and clear the scope of application of the law, as repeatedly recommended by the Venice Commission for the Council of Europe.

Human rights observers continued to express concern over the growing presence of the Armenian Apostolic Church in public education.

The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Collaboration for Democracy was denied permission to observe pilot classes of a new course on the “History of the Armenian Church/Christian Education” developed for 2nd, 3rd, and 4th graders by the National Institute of Education of the Ministry of Education and Science and beginning in the 2012-2013 academic year. According to a ministry official, the pilot course was an “ethics class with spiritual direction.” Local observers viewed the course as a religious instruction class with subjects including, but not limited to, the divine creation of the world, study of the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, and prayers. The NGO reported difficulties in obtaining additional details about the course content and the list of schools where the course had been introduced.

While addressing the National Assembly on May 21, Minister of Education Armen Ashotyan said the government had no intention of following the 2013 recommendation by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to revise school curricula to reflect freedom of religion and eliminate the compulsory “History of the Armenian Church” course. The minister also said the government planned to begin new programs to strengthen the “patriotic upbringing component in the education system” and that 3,000 students in elementary classes had already taken the new Christian education course.

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On April 22, a group of experts supported by the Open Society Foundations-Armenia (OSFA) presented at a round table a research paper entitled “Content Analysis of the Armenian Church History Textbooks and Its Influence on Young Generations.” According to the experts, the course went beyond the history of the Armenian Church and focused on presenting the faith system, history, values, and rites of the Armenian Apostolic Church as the only acceptable religion. According to the experts, the course materials, which equated Armenian identity to affiliation with the Armenian Apostolic Church, cast doubts on other religious groups. For instance, the course materials presented Protestant movements as threats to the unity of the Armenian people. The report said the mandatory nature of the course and the exclusive role played by the church in shaping its content contradicted the secular nature of the state. According to the National Institute on Education, it had never received complaints from parents about the course.

A study published by the Council of Europe identified public schools as a place where discriminatory attitudes and stereotypes of religious minorities were formed. The study cited numerous reports that teachers and principals discriminated against religious minority children, saying they singled out the children of religious minorities, potentially creating problems for those students with their peers. Most of the objections to the course on Armenian church history reportedly came from students and parents from families affiliated with but not practicing the Armenian Apostolic faith. Children of minority Christian groups reportedly did not object to taking the class as long as their rights were respected.

Yezidi community representatives reportedly had unsuccessfully appealed to the minister of education to make the class optional for the students of their community.

As of August a total of 128 members of the Jehovah’s Witnesses were serving in the alternative labor service for conscientious objectors. The group reported its members were well-treated and said it was “very satisfied” with the government’s efforts to implement the new service created by the 2013 amendment to the law.

According to reports from multiple religious groups, discrimination against individuals who were not members of the Armenian Apostolic Church continued to be a problem in gaining employment in the public sector, especially in the public education system.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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Many media outlets continued to label minority religious groups as “sects” and broadcast discussions and news stories in which members of the Armenian Apostolic Church clergy characterized minority religious groups as “enemies of the state.” Some media outlets continued to publish articles portraying religious minorities as criminals and spies. Most such statements did not specify a particular religious group. Most religious groups, however, reported the situation had improved in comparison with previous years, with journalists portraying their activities more accurately and objectively.

As part of the OSFA-supported study of the content of the Armenian Church History textbooks, the authors conducted anonymous surveys with 254 students in the grades 5-8 from six different schools to assess their attitudes towards the Armenian Apostolic Church and other religious organizations. According to the results of the survey, the respondents expressed highly negative attitudes, sometimes endorsing violence towards religious organizations other than the Armenian Apostolic Church, considering them as threats to the unity of the people. The respondents also called for an increased role for the Armenian Apostolic Church and more frequent visits of priests to schools.

According to local observers and NGO representatives, the sentiments expressed by the school students reflected the views of the majority of the population; most people took for granted that the Armenian Apostolic Church would play an increased role in schools and in public life.

Several religious organizations reported improved relations with the Armenian Apostolic Church following the November 2013 election of Patriarch Karekin II as one of the eight presidents of the World Council of Churches. Some minority religious groups reported they had experienced “positive discrimination” in employment in the private sector, with employers viewing their members in a positive light due to their religious practices.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador, embassy representatives, and visiting U.S. officials promoted religious freedom and interfaith dialogue publicly and during meetings with government officials, including members of the cabinet and parliamentarians, where they emphasized the rights of all citizens to practice their faith without

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hindrance, and that members of religious minorities should not be considered a threat.

The Ambassador met with the Catholicos (global leader) of the Armenian Apostolic Church and other church leaders to advance religious freedom and tolerance and to underscore the necessity of allowing religious minorities to practice their faith without hindrance. Other embassy officers engaged with religious and civil society leaders regularly throughout the year to promote religious tolerance.

Embassy officers met with a broad range of representatives of religious and ethnic/religious minorities, including Catholics, different evangelical groups, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Yezidis, Assyrians, and Jews, as well as representatives of the Armenian Apostolic Church, to discuss developments related to the exercise of people's right to religious freedom and freedom of conscience in the country. Several groups credited embassy engagement for the successful resolution of, or continued progress in, their cases, including continued attention given to the implementation of alternative service for conscientious objectors.