

ARMENIA

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Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 11,500 square miles and a population of more than three million. According to the 2001 census, 97.8 percent of the population is ethnic Armenian. An estimated 90 percent of citizens nominally belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church (Armenian Church), one of six ancient autocephalous Eastern churches, which has its spiritual center (Mother See) located at the Etchmiadzin cathedral and monastery near the capital of Yerevan.

There are small communities of other religious groups. Groups constituting less than 5 percent of the population include the following: Roman Catholic, Armenian Uniate (Mekhitarist) Catholic, Orthodox Christian, Armenian Evangelical Christian, Molokan, Pentecostal, Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist, various groups of charismatic Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Yezidis (non-Muslim Kurds who practice Yezidism), Jews, Sunni Muslim Kurds, Shiite Muslims, pagans, and others.

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

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution protects religious freedom; however, other laws and policies place some restrictions on the religious freedom of members of minority religious groups.

The law does not mandate registration of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including religious groups; however, only registered organizations 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 organizations 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 organizations of national minorities. The Office of the State Registrar registers religious entities. The Department of Religious Affairs and National Minorities oversees religious affairs and performs a consultative role in the registration process. There were no reports that the government refused to register religious groups that applied.

The constitution recognizes "the exclusive mission of the Armenian 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 and the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations establish separation of church and state but grant the Armenian Church official status as the national church.

The law grants certain privileges to the Armenian Church that are not available to other religious groups. It makes the Armenian Church's marriage rite legally binding, but the supporting legal acts to enforce this are not in place. The Armenian Church is also allowed to have permanent representatives in hospitals, orphanages, boarding schools, military units, and all places of detention, while other religious organizations may have representatives in these places on demand only. In general the law formally recognizes the moral as well as ethnic role the

Armenian Church plays in society, since most citizens see it as an integral part of national identity and cultural heritage.

The law prohibits but does not define "soul hunting," a term perceived to describe both proselytism and forced conversion. The prohibition applies to all groups, including the Armenian Church. Most registered religious groups reported no significant legal impediments to their activities during the reporting period.

The law mandates public schools offer a secular education. Only personnel authorized and trained by the government may teach in public schools. Courses in the history of the Armenian Church are part of the public school curriculum and are taught by public school teachers. The Armenian Church has the right to participate in the development of the study program and schoolbooks of this course, as well as define the qualifications for teachers delivering the course. The Armenian Church may also nominate candidates to teach the course. All religious organizations may establish groups for religious instruction to train their members, utilizing facilities belonging to or set aside for them. The law grants the Armenian Church the right to organize voluntary religious classes in state education institutions using the facilities and resources of those institutions.

The government observes January 6, the day on which the Armenian Church celebrates Christmas, as a national holiday. During the year the government designates, through its decrees, five church observances as official Monday holidays, during which it is customary to visit the graves of loved ones. The preceding or following Saturdays are designated as workdays.

The law allows conscientious objectors--subject to government panel approval--to perform either noncombatant military or labor service duties rather than serve as combat-trained military personnel. The law also criminalizes evasion of alternative labor service. However, conscientious objectors regarded as unacceptable military control of the alternative labor service.

Although the law prohibits foreign funding of foreign-based denominations, the government did not enforce the ban.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally did not enforce existing legal restrictions on religious freedom. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

Throughout the reporting period, local observers reported that negative attitudes towards teachers and children involved in religious groups other than the Armenian Church existed in schools. Reportedly such attitudes were more apparent during classes on the history of the Armenian Church, which according to religious groups and local observers contained elements of religious instruction.

Christian Cultural Ministries International (CCMI), an NGO associated with the Yerevan Evangelical Church, filed suit in September against the Government Commission Coordinating Charitable Programs office for its May revocation of CCMI's charitable qualification. CCMI requested the court reverse the revocation order and compensate CCMI for the taxes CCMI paid on its programs. CCMI alleged that it was a victim of religious discrimination and that the Armenian Church falsely claimed that CCMI engaged in preaching and "soul hunting" during its charitable operations.

The Jehovah's Witnesses congregation reported that it continued to face problems with renting large premises for annual gatherings. The group reported that it had applied unsuccessfully to more than a dozen premises (mostly stadiums) that were privately owned or were owned or managed by state or local government bodies. In some instances the group had already signed contracts that were later revoked. The group alleged that the owners and managers of the premises were pressured by the Armenian Church and representatives of law-enforcement bodies into turning down the requests of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country, including religious prisoners and detainees.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, from June 1 to December 31, 19 Jehovah's Witnesses were sentenced to imprisonment for evasion of military or alternative service. Ten of those sentenced received a 30-month sentence, five a 24-month sentence, two a 36-month sentence, one a 27-month sentence, and one a 12-month sentence.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses leaders in Yerevan, as of December 31, 73 of their members remained in prison for refusing to perform military service or alternative labor service on conscientious and religious grounds. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives stated that all of the prisoners had been given the

opportunity to serve an alternative to military service rather than prison time but had refused because they objected to the fact that the military retained administrative control over the alternative service.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Societal attitudes were ambivalent toward most minority religious groups. While many citizens are not religiously observant, the link between Armenian ethnicity and the Armenian Church is strong.

According to some observers, the general population expressed negative attitudes about all minority religious groups. According to local experts, however, these attitudes did not affect personal and neighborly relationships but rather constituted a general perception of minority religious groups as threats to the state. Minority religious groups at times continued to be targets of hostile sermons by Armenian Church clerics, and members of minority religious groups experienced societal discrimination and intolerance, including in the workplace.

On October 19, the Hebrew side of the Joint Tragedies Memorial, erected in downtown Yerevan in 2006, was vandalized. Brown paint was poured over the memorial and "Death to the Jew" was stenciled on the memorial with a swastika. Representatives of the Jewish community denied the presence of anti-Semitic sentiments in the country and labeled the incident "hooliganism," possibly caused by foreigners. The Jewish community praised the immediate reaction by the presidential administration, which called into action local authorities and law enforcement. The city administration removed the signs of vandalism by the next morning, and the police launched an investigation. On October 21, the president's press secretary and the Armenian Church made separate statements condemning the desecration of the memorial.

Most media outlets, including the state-owned Public TV channel, continued to label religious groups other than the Armenian Church as "sects" in their publications and broadcasting. Various television stations continued to broadcast discussions in which representatives of the Armenian Church and other participants labeled religious minority groups as enemies of the state and of national unity.

On November 9, News.am, an online news agency, reported that a murder suspect, who allegedly killed his parents, was a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses who

often argued with his parents about his religious beliefs. Numerous media outlets, including the state-owned Public H1 TV channel and various other television stations, print press, radio stations, and online news agencies, immediately began reporting this unverified allegation as fact. On November 11, the local leadership of the Jehovah's Witnesses officially refuted the "unfounded and inaccurate" allegation, saying that the young man suspected of the murder had never been affiliated with their organization and that the initial news report started "a wave of slanderous media reports inciting religious intolerance." The Jehovah's Witnesses' leadership also wrote letters to news agencies and television stations demanding a refutation of the accusation and a public apology.

On November 11, the deputy director of information and analytical programs of the state-owned Public H1 TV channel, during his analytical program *Tesankyun* (Viewpoint), stated that the alleged member of Jehovah's Witnesses murder suspect "was told by his god to commit the murder." The anchor showed clips of violence from a movie (unrelated to the issue of religious freedom) and suggested that similarly violent tactics be applied toward "sects." The anchor also made direct calls for intolerance toward "sects."

Throughout the reporting period, a group calling itself the One Nation Party or One Nation Alliance of Organizations continued to circulate leaflets throughout Yerevan denouncing Jehovah's Witnesses. Most of the leaflets simply warned against "sects," but there were others that called on citizens to "fight" against them.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Embassy officials maintained close contact with the Catholicos (primate of the Armenian Church) at Etchmiadzin and with leaders of other religious and ecumenical groups in the country. The embassy also maintained regular contact with resident and visiting representatives of foreign-based religious groups and raised their concerns with the government when necessary. Embassy officials participated in many religious communities' events and other events to promote religious freedom.