

ARMENIA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states that everyone has freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It recognizes the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) as the national church and preserver of national identity but also establishes separation of “religious organizations” and the state. According to media, in March police attempted to pressure a self-identified atheist youth to return to the AAC. On several occasions, Nikol Pashinyan, elected prime minister in May following nationwide protests, declared that state and church were separate and the government would not interfere in church matters. According to local observers, the new government suspended the process of adopting a new draft law on religious freedom of major concern to religious minorities. According to representatives of the Baha’i community, authorities detained a prominent member of the community in December 2017 and held him until July, when a court released him on bail. Some civil society and minority religious groups continued to state their concerns that the content of the History of the Armenian Church (HAC) courses taught in public schools discriminated against religious minorities and that the courses did not provide an opt-out mechanism. According to the Center for Religion and Law, an evangelical Protestant teacher in a public school in the village of Yelpin became a target of religious discrimination.

According to media analysts, following the April “velvet revolution,” individuals affiliated with or sympathetic to the ousted government used religious issues to denounce the new government. Various private media outlets and social media users stated that minority religious groups, which they referred to as “sects,” had led the revolution and that these “sects” continued to exercise influence over the new government. According to local observers, these remarks led to a dramatic decrease in objective reporting on religious issues. Religious minorities said that what they characterized as a “nationalistic climate,” especially outside the capital, had caused their members to experience societal discrimination.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials. Embassy officials met with AAC leaders to engage the AAC in supporting the rights of religious minorities to practice their faiths without restrictions. In July the Ambassador hosted an event to foster interreligious dialogue, mutual respect, and cooperation, bringing together representatives of the AAC, religious and ethnic minorities, and civil society and sharing the previous Department of State report on

international religious freedom. The embassy used Facebook and Twitter to send messages in support of religious tolerance. The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly met with minority religious groups, including with evangelical Christians and other Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Yezidis, the Jewish community, Apostolic Assyrians, Pentecostals, and Baha'is, to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.0 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2011 census, approximately 92 percent of the population identifies with the AAC. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, Armenian Uniate (Mekhitarist) Catholics, Orthodox Christians, evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, charismatic Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, members of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East, pagans, Molokan Christians, Yezidis, Jews, Baha'is, Shia Muslims, and Sunni Muslims. According to an International Republican Institute poll released in October, 94 percent of the country's population identify as Armenian Apostolic, 2 percent as Catholic, 3 percent other, and 1 percent none. According to members of the Jewish community, there are approximately 800 Jews in the country.

Yezidis are concentrated primarily in agricultural areas northwest of Yerevan around Mount Aragats, and Armenian Uniate Catholics live primarily in the north. Most Jews, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, and Orthodox Christians reside in Yerevan, along with a small community of Muslims. Most Muslims 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 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 to incite 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.

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

To register as a legal entity, a religious community must 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.” It also must be “free from materialism and...[be] of a spiritual nature,” have at least 200 adult members, and follow a doctrine 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 part of the “international modern system.” The law specifies that this list of registration requirements, to which the Division of Religious Affairs and National Minorities must attest, does not apply to a religious organization based on the faith of one of the groups recognized as national minorities. A religious community may appeal a decision by the Office of the State Registrar 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 (\$410) to detention for up to two months.

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

The law prohibits a police employee and employees of the National Security Service, service for mandatory enforcement of court rulings, penitentiary service, or rescue service from being a member of a religious organization; however, the law does not define the meaning of “membership” in a religious organization. The law prohibits members of police, military, and National Security Service, as well as prosecutors, customs officials, diplomats, and other national, community, and civil servants, from using their official positions for the benefit of “religious associations” or from preaching in support of them. The law also prohibits police, prosecutors, and other state and civil servants from conducting other religious activities while performing official duties. 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, it provides no definition for “religious associations.” A military service member may not establish a religious association. If a member of the military is a member of a religious association, the member does not have the right to preach to other service personnel during the military service.

The penitentiary code allows penal institutions to invite clergy members to conduct religious ceremonies and use religious objects and literature. Prisoners may request spiritual assistance from the religious group of their choice.

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 with permission from the head of the institution. The law also stipulates the state will not interfere with the AAC’s exclusive right to preach freely and spread its beliefs throughout the entire territory of the country.

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 for by law. While adding an HAC course in a public or private school is optional, once a school chooses to do so, the course is mandatory for all students in grades five to 11; there is no opt-out provision for students or their parents.

The AAC has the right to participate in the development of the syllabi and textbooks for the HAC course and to define the qualifications of their teachers. The Church may nominate candidates to teach the courses, although the teachers are state employees. 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 30 months, or alternative labor service for 36 months. Evasion of alternative service is a criminal offense. Penalties range from two months' detention to eight years' imprisonment, depending on the circumstances of the case.

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 (\$410 to \$1,030) to prison terms of between two and six years.

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

Government Practices

On March 30, *Epress.am*, an independent online outlet focused on human rights reporting, reported that police officers from the town of Hrazdan attempted to pressure a youth who identified as atheist to “return” to the AAC. According to the report, unidentified police officers, under false pretenses, took the youth to the Children’s Support Center to meet with a psychologist, where he was held overnight.

Starting in June, the “New Armenia, New Patriarch” initiative group, comprising AAC self-identified secular activists and two former members of the AAC clergy, protested and demanded the resignation of Karekin II, Supreme Patriarch and Catholicos of All Armenians. On June 6, the group made a statement accusing Catholicos Karekin II of weakening the AAC and of “submitting the country to sects, homosexuals, atheists, and opportunists.” On July 14, protesters blocked the

Catholicos's vehicle at the Gndevank monastery complex in the Vayots Dzor Region and blocked him as he tried to walk away from the venue. Protesters insulted him in the presence of police. According to an AAC priest from the Vagharshapat Cathedral, in addition to pushing and pulling him, the protesters restricted the Catholicos' freedom of movement and threatened to lock him in the monastery. On July 15, on Facebook Livestream, Prime Minister Pashinyan described these developments as an internal church matter into which the government should not interfere and urged the clergy to discuss and find a solution to those internal disagreements. He also emphasized the government's role in upholding the law, stating he was not satisfied with police actions, which he had observed in videos of the incident. The prime minister stated he had tasked police to examine carefully the Vayots Dzor incident and assess whether the protesters' actions were justified. According to the police press service, the police chief instructed officers to investigate the incident and assess police actions; however, according to the AAC representative in Echmiatsin, police dropped the case because they said there was no threat to the Catholicos' life.

On July 6, the same group of activists broke into the AAC chancery in Echmiatsin, which includes the Catholicos' residence and offices, and staged around-the-clock protests. According to an AAC priest, in response to the Church's request for police assistance, police initially stated that churches and monasteries were public spaces and they could not remove the protesters. After three days, however, police removed them. The activists continued to hold occasional rallies in downtown Yerevan and threatened to track all of the Catholicos' movements.

On May 8, the National Assembly elected as prime minister Nikol Pashinyan, who had led protests against former Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan that led to Sargsyan's resignation on April 23. On several occasions, Pashinyan reiterated that state and church were separate and the government would not interfere in church affairs. The new government indefinitely halted the process of adoption of a package of laws called "Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations" initiated by the former government. According to religious freedom experts and many members of the religious community, the most recent version of the draft package, published in November 2017, sought to control religious organizations, including by banning religious expression under certain circumstances and banning foreign funding of religious organizations. The draft also included mandatory public reporting, with the possibility of suspending an organization for failure to report. Representatives of evangelical Protestant churches said government authorities could selectively apply such provisions to target "unwanted" minority religious groups.

According to representatives of the Baha'i community, authorities detained Edward Manasyan, a prominent member of the community, in December 2017 and held him until July on what members of the community said were religious grounds. In July the trial court judge released him on bail. His trial continued at year's end. Local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and human rights lawyers said they were concerned about the case, including the surveillance of members of the Baha'i community preceding Manasyan's arrest.

In early September there were media reports that minority religious "sects" infiltrated a school in Yelpin village in Vayots Dzor Region, which caused a number of parents to refuse to send their children to the school. According to the Center for Religion and Law, after a group of four teachers filed a police report stating the school principal was involved in corruption, the latter started a smear campaign against the teachers, leading to local activists and council members accusing the teachers of being members of religious "sects." Activists demanded the teachers' dismissal, stating they could "indoctrinate" the students. Once it became clear that three of the four teachers were AAC followers and that the other teacher was a member of an evangelical Protestant church, the latter became the sole target of the protests, even though the activists admitted they had no proof she was preaching or proselytizing during school activities. Because of the boycott, the school cancelled all but one of the teacher's classes, resulting in reduction of her pay. According to the Center for Religion and Law, which represented the teacher, the latter was subject to reprisal and discrimination because of her religion. The governor's office stated it had taken measures to resolve the issue, explaining to the teachers of the school and the parents of the students that according to the constitution everyone enjoys freedom of conscience, religion, and belief. The governor's office disciplined the school principal. According to the Center for Religion and Law, the evangelical Protestant teacher's working conditions had not changed by year's end.

The vast majority of public and private schools continued to teach HAC courses throughout the country in grades five through 11. According to official information, the HAC was taught in all public schools with no exceptions, although during the year there were anecdotal reports that at least one public school and two schools in Yezidi villages did not teach the course. During a parliamentary briefing on November 14, the new minister of education stated the HAC course needed serious revisions. According to the deputy minister, the reform would likely take approximately three years and would include a review of the HAC with a new focus on history of religions in compliance with the

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools. In the interim, beginning with the 2019-20 academic year, national minorities could choose an alternative course to the HAC.

Yezidi community representatives again reported dissatisfaction with the mandatory HAC course, terming it “religious indoctrination.” While all Yezidi schools were able to remove the course from their curriculum, Yezidi children who attended mixed schools were obliged to take the course, regardless of parental objections.

Several non-AAC religious groups said they did not object to the inclusion of the HAC course in public schools, although some objected to the prayers and crossing that reportedly occurred during those classes and said they would like to see a more accurate portrayal of religious groups other than the AAC. The Ministry of Education stated that during the year it did not receive any complaints about the HAC course and that it had instructed HAC teachers to maintain the secular nature of the class and refrain from religious propaganda. NGOs, other religious organizations, atheists, and nonpracticing members of the AAC publicly voiced concerns about what they stated were elements of religious indoctrination contained in the HAC course, as well as material equating AAC affiliation with national identity. There were reports of AAC clergy teaching the course in some schools and requiring visits to AAC churches as part of the course, without providing opportunities for discussion of other faiths or for students to visit non-AAC religious sites. According to the government, during the 2018-19 academic year, six AAC clergy members taught the HAC course in four public and two private schools.

Human rights activists expressed their concern that religious elements were a consistent part of the public education process and were present even outside the AAC course.

Based on a Ministry of Education pilot program launched in 2012, school administrations had the option to include an additional course, entitled “History of the AAC/Christian Education,” in their curriculum for grades two through four. During the new school year, 74 schools followed this option.

According to the government, no religious groups other than the AAC requested to visit a military unit. The chaplaincy program, a joint Ministry of Defense-AAC initiative, continued to allow only AAC clergy to serve in the program.

According to the government, during the year, the AAC conducted visits, up to three times per week, to each of the 12 penitentiaries to engage in spiritual discussions with incarcerated followers and to hold services, baptisms and other religious events. Representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Armenian Evangelical Church visited some of the penitentiaries four, 16, and seven times, respectively, during the first nine months of the year.

Jehovah's Witnesses said they continued to face difficulties in building places of worship because of interference by local officials throughout the country. At year's end, three pending cases continued before the European Court of Human Rights regarding the prohibition by the Yerevan City Municipality on building places of worship on land owned by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Seventh-day Adventists reported their dissatisfaction over some schools operating on Saturdays or school- or state-level examinations scheduled for Saturdays, a day of worship for the community. The group stated, however, that on an individual level their members were able to resolve the issue. The new government stopped the practice of designating AAC holidays as nonworking days, making the following or preceding Saturday a working day.

As of May 123 Jehovah's Witnesses were working in the alternative civilian service program.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to media analysts, following the April "velvet revolution," private individuals affiliated with or sympathetic to the ousted government used religious issues as a means to denounce the new government. According to media and religious freedom experts, those individuals used hybrid websites, controversial bloggers, local troll factories, fake Facebook groups, and false stories to propagate the idea that the revolution was carried out by minority religious groups or "sects," (commonly considered any group other than the AAC). These individuals alleged those religious minority groups continued to influence the new government.

In September the Word of Life Church requested the National Security Service (NSS) to open a criminal case regarding a fake Facebook page that falsely presented itself as associated both with the Word of Life Church and the prime minister's Civil Contract party. According to World of Life Church representatives, among other posts, the Facebook page posted a photograph of the

senior pastor of the Word of Life Church and included an article with anti-Armenian and anti-AAC statements, causing a public uproar against the Church. Word of Life Church representatives said they believed an organized group, mostly likely a political adversary of the new government, was behind the fake Facebook page. On October 1, the NSS opened a criminal case on charges of incitement of religious hatred; at year's end, the investigation continued and the Facebook page was still active.

Social media criticized several government officials because of their affiliation with minority religious groups. On one occasion, a member of the Word of Life Church, appointed to a position in the new government, said he resigned following public pressure.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, there were incidents of verbal abuse toward the group's members while they were publicly manifesting their religious beliefs. In some cases, unknown individuals overturned and damaged the group's literature display carts. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, police responded promptly and appropriately, and as a result, the number of incidents had decreased.

Construction continued on Quba Mere Diwane Temple, which media called the world's largest Yezidi temple. Located in the small village of Aknalich, the Yezidi community said it would become the spiritual center for the country's Yezidis.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to promote religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials. Embassy officials and a visiting official from the Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom met with representatives of the Ministry of Justice in April to discuss concerns raised by religious minorities and human rights groups about restrictive provisions in the proposed package of legislation on religious freedom. Embassy officials met with representatives of the Ministry of Education to discuss concerns about the HAC course and steps undertaken by the government to address those concerns.

The Ambassador regularly met with representatives of the government, political parties, social groups, and religious minorities to discuss problems of discrimination faced by religious minorities, foster a dialogue between the government and the religious groups, and explore cooperative solutions to those problems. In July the Ambassador hosted an event to foster interreligious

dialogue, mutual respect, and cooperation, bringing together representatives of the AAC, religious and ethnic minorities, and civil society to discuss issues of concern and foster a dialogue between the groups and share the Department of State 2017 report on international religious freedom. In the meeting, the Ambassador emphasized the fundamental universal right for every person to have freedom of worship and the freedom to choose to believe or not believe.

The Ambassador met with leaders of the AAC and engaged them on the importance of supporting the right of religious minorities to practice their faiths without restrictions. Embassy officials attended conferences and discussions on nondiscrimination and religious tolerance regularly hosted by the Eurasian Partnership Foundation in its religious tolerance projects. They visited a Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian village, attending the celebration of the 190th anniversary of the establishment of the Assyrian community in the country. Embassy officials also visited the Yezidi Ferik village and held regular meetings with representatives of the AAC and religious and ethnic minorities, including evangelical Christians and other Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, adherents of the Church of Jesus Christ, Yezidis, the Jewish community, Apostolic Assyrians, Pentecostals, and Baha'is. In these meetings, embassy officials and religious group representatives discussed the state of religious freedom in the country, including minority religious group concerns. They also met with civil society groups to discuss concerns about the HAC courses taught in public schools. Embassy officials monitored the trial of the Baha'i member facing prosecution on what the group stated were religious grounds.

Embassy officials met with a joint delegation of the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and European Union Venice Commission to discuss the concerns raised by some religious groups over the draft package of legislation on religious freedom.

The embassy used social media, including Twitter and Facebook, to send messages supporting religious diversity and tolerance and to highlight the January 11 annual International Religious Freedom Day and the release of the Department of State report on international religious freedom.