

ARMENIA 2022 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. The law prohibits, but does not define, proselytism, which may be interpreted as forced conversion. The new criminal code, which came into force on July 1, prohibits “obstruction of the right to exercise freedom of religion” as well as hate speech or inciting violence against an individual or group based on religion; punishments include fines, community service, and imprisonment.

In November, a trial court dismissed the criminal case against prominent Baha’i lawyer Edward Manasyan, charged in 2017 with facilitating illegal immigration, due to the expiration of the statute of limitations. Baha’i community members said they believed the charges had been brought because of Manasyan’s religion. In October, a court suspended the trial of Yezidi human rights activist Sashik Sultanyan, indicted in 2021 on charges of “inciting enmity,” after it determined he left the country in July. The court subsequently issued a warrant for his arrest. In August, the ombudsperson brought a case before the Constitutional Court disputing the constitutionality of the prohibition against National Security Service (NSS) employees being members of religious groups, as well as the constitutionality of the absolute ban on military personnel establishing religious organizations. Media reports continued to discuss what they characterized as the deteriorating relationship between the AAC and the government over the government’s handling of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Jehovah’s Witnesses representatives stated that local officials in some communities continued to deny permission for the group to build Kingdom Halls. During the year, the government continued a process to remove a course on the history of the AAC

from the mandatory school curriculum, distributing relevant historical content across a broader curriculum on Armenian studies.

Most religious minorities, including Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical Christian groups, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Baha'i Faith, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), continued to report public attitudes toward them were generally positive and said there was little or no negative media coverage concerning them. Some media outlets, however, did carry negative reports during the year on religious minority groups that critics, including some AAC clergy, labeled as "sects" (i.e., cults) and said the groups endangered national security. According to evangelical groups targeted, the negative coverage reflected the attitudes of individual clergy members and not the AAC as an institution. Jehovah's Witnesses reported six instances of verbal abuse and attacks on their public stands that displayed religious materials following the group's resumption of in-person outreach activities on April 1. One local Protestant group reported the general public held cautious to negative attitudes towards it due to the public's associating the group's advocacy for peace with the government's peace agenda toward Azerbaijan and Turkey. Anonymous social media users continued to vilify the evangelical Word of Life Church online. In contrast with previous years, the Jewish community reported a decline in antisemitism, which had increased after Azerbaijan forces used Israeli-supplied weapons during intensive fighting in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the fall of 2020.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to promote religious tolerance, respect for religious minorities, and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials, including from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and parliament. The U.S. Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and embassy representatives raised with government officials and members of parliament the cases of criminal prosecution of Yezidi and Baha'i leaders and monitored their trials. The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly met with the AAC and minority religious groups to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious

Freedom and embassy officials engaged government officials and civil society representatives in discussions on the continuing impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on religious groups and religious sites of significance to Armenian communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.0 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2011 census, approximately 92 percent of the population identify as Armenian Apostolic. Other religious groups include Roman Catholics, Armenian Uniate Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and evangelical Christians, including Armenian Evangelical Church adherents, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, charismatic Christians, and Jehovah's Witnesses. There are also followers of the Church of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Apostolic Catholic Assyrian Church of the East as well as Molokan Christians, Yezidis, Jews, Baha'is, Shia Muslims, Sunni Muslims, and pagans who adhere to a pre-Christian faith. According to members of the Jewish community, there are approximately 800 to 1,000 Jews. According to the census, there are more than 35,000 Yezidis, with more recent estimates by Yezidi human rights activists and academics suggesting a figure of 50,000. Yezidis are concentrated primarily in agricultural areas northwest of Yerevan around Mount Aragats. Armenian Uniate Catholics live primarily in the north. 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 prohibits discrimination based on religion and establishes separation of “religious organizations” and the state. It recognizes the “exclusive mission of the Armenian Apostolic Church” as the 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 for the purpose of inciting religious enmity. It stipulates that national minorities shall have the right to preserve and develop their traditions, religion, language, and culture.

The law prohibits, but does not define, “soul hunting,” a term describing both proselytism and forced conversion. The law prohibits religious organizations with spiritual centers located outside the country from receiving funding from those foreign centers, but there is no mechanism to enforce this provision. The law also prohibits religious organizations from funding or being funded by political parties. The law prohibits religious organizations from establishing “public organizations,” the legal term for registered nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

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 or 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 Office of the Prime Minister’s Division of Religious Affairs and National Minorities stating its expert opinion on 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, including Assyrians, Kurds, Russians, and Yezidis, among others. A religious community may appeal a decision by the Office of the State Registrar through the courts.

The country’s new criminal code, which came into force on July 1, prohibits “obstructing the right to exercise freedom of religion” and prescribes punishments for violations, including fines, up to 100 hours of community service, restriction of freedom (i.e., at liberty but under official supervision) for a maximum of one year, and imprisonment ranging from one month to one year. Punishment is more stringent if the violation is committed by officials. The code prohibits hate speech and public calls for violence towards an individual or group on religious grounds through public statements, mass media, or using one’s public position. Punishments for hate speech include fines, up to 150 hours of community service, and imprisonment for up to two years. Punishments for public calls for violence include fines, up to 100 hours of community service, and imprisonment for up to one year.

The Office of the Human Rights Defender (ombudsperson) has a mandate to address violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion, committed by officials of state and local governments. The ombudsperson may make recommendations but does not have the power to enforce them.

The law prohibits employees of the NSS from being members of a religious organization, but it does not define “membership.” The law prohibits members of

the police, military, and the NSS, as well as prosecutors, diplomats, and public servants, from using their official positions for the benefit of “religious associations” or from preaching in support of them. 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 their term of military service. The law also prohibits police, prosecutors, diplomats, and employees of local municipalities from conducting religious activities while performing official duties. The law has not been interpreted as barring affected individuals from attending worship services or participating in other religious rituals.

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. A joint Ministry of Defense-AAC agreement allows only AAC clergy to serve as military chaplains.

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 shall 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. A course on the history of the Armenian Church, which extends beyond the teaching of history to include AAC values and practices, remains a part of the recommended school curriculum for 2021-22 and 2022-23. If a public or private school chooses to include the course, it becomes mandatory

for all students in grades five to 11, with no opt-out provision for students or their parents.

The AAC has the right to participate in the development of syllabi and textbooks for the church history course and to define the qualifications of the teachers. While the AAC may nominate candidates to teach the church history course, 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 public educational institutions. Religious institutions may not operate parochial schools but may provide religious instruction at their facilities as an extracurricular activity.

The labor code prohibits employers from collecting and analyzing data on the religious views of employees. The labor code authorizes up to four days of unpaid leave for observing national and religious holidays or remembrance days, regardless of religious affiliation.

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 either type of alternative service is a criminal offense. Penalties range from two to 12 years' imprisonment, depending on the circumstances of the case.

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

Government Practices

On November 29, the First Instance Court of Yerevan dismissed the case against Edward Manasyan, a lawyer and prominent member of the Baha'i community, due to the expiration of the statute of limitations. Authorities in 2017 charged Manasyan with facilitating illegal immigration by advising Iranians wishing to settle in the country. Members of the Baha'i community said authorities initiated

the case because of Manasyan's religious beliefs. According to representatives of the community, as a result of the trial, community members lived under a constant sense of threat and exercised extra caution in their day-to-day lives for fear of being charged in criminal cases. In 2021, the Baha'i community filed an appeal with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) on behalf of the secretary of the community as well as two additional appeals with the ECHR, one on behalf of the chairman of the community and the other as a religious organization, alleging the NSS had illegally wiretapped the secretary and used the information gathered to charge Manasyan. The appeal remained pending at year's end.

On October 26, Yerevan's First Instance Court suspended the trial of Yezidi human rights activist Sashik Sultanyan on charges of "incitement of national, racial, or religious enmity" when the court determined he left the country in July. Judge Karen Farkhoyan also issued a warrant for his arrest on October 26. According to Sultanyan's lawyers, the NSS initiated the charges against Sultanyan, when, in 2021, Sultanyan, in what he believed were "off the record" comments, told a journalist the government was not doing enough to protect the country's Yezidi minority from discrimination. The journalist surreptitiously recorded and posted the comments online. If convicted, Sultanyan could face up to four years in prison. He reportedly left the country due to additional pressure and threats from police.

According to Jehovah's Witnesses, at year's end, 103 Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors to military service were working in the alternative civilian labor service program, a number similar to previous years, and 355 had finished their service in the program. Alternative civilian service appointments included positions in hospitals, local utility companies, park maintenance services, boarding schools, eldercare facilities, and orphanages. According to government sources, members of Jehovah's Witnesses were the only individuals participating in the alternative civilian labor service and no individuals chose to participate in alternative (noncombat) military service.

On February 12, responding to a query from the Prison Monitoring Group, a coalition of local NGOs, the Ministry of Justice reported that during 2021, AAC clergymen regularly visited penitentiaries, organized baptisms, offered liturgies, and celebrated holidays with prisoners. Overall, a total of 665 inmates participated in 56 religious events in 2021. According to the ministry, other religious organizations visited prisons as well. Authorities generally granted most inmate requests to meet with other religious organizations; however, the ministry did not keep statistics on those visits. While some religious minority groups reported that they did not visit prisons on a regular basis due to a lack of inmate requests, Jehovah's Witnesses reported organizing two baptisms in prisons during the year with full support from prison administrators.

On August 23, the ombudsperson brought a case before to the Constitutional Court disputing the constitutionality of the prohibition against NSS employees belonging to religious groups, as well as the constitutionality of the absolute ban on military personnel establishing religious organizations. The Constitutional Court scheduled a hearing for March 2023.

Although there was no mechanism for enforcing the legal provision prohibiting funding of religious organizations by spiritual centers located outside the country, several religious organizations said they continued to comply with the ban and restricted their operations because they did not want to violate the law.

According to experts, the absence of legal provisions regulating the invitation and stay of foreign religious volunteers affected several religious minority groups, whose foreign volunteers had to leave the country after 180 days and then return to renew their tourist status.

The case of a Baha'i family from Europe appealing the decision of the Passport and Visas Department of the Police of Armenia to deny their residency status remained ongoing at year's end. According to the Baha'i community, authorities refused to provide residency status to the family after the NSS opposed the

residency application, reportedly without providing any legal grounds. In September 2021, the family appealed to the Administrative Court.

Unlike in 2021, there were no reports during the year of unsubstantiated rejection of religion-based asylum claims.

Media reports continued to discuss what they characterized as the deteriorating relationship between the AAC and the government following AAC head Catholicos Karekin II's call in 2020 for Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to resign over the ceasefire arrangement between the country and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh. On January 6, during the Divine Christmas Liturgy, Catholicos Karekin said, "Every position and authority in the public, political, or state spheres must serve to [advance] the progress of the country, and the general welfare and security; just as in a pious family. When a position ceases to be perceived as a service, it turns into a cause of arbitrariness, of evil and unjust deeds." The Prime Minister did not attend the liturgy, a ceremony that state leaders traditionally attend. During the year, there were reports that the AAC did not participate in major government events.

The Jehovah's Witnesses Office of Public Information stated in its annual religious freedom report that local officials in some communities continued to deny permission for the group to build Kingdom Halls.

On March 22, the ECHR found that de facto authorities in Nagorno-Karabakh violated the rights of Jehovah's Witnesses by refusing to register their community in 2009, 2010, and 2011. The ECHR ordered Armenia – as the authority exercising "effective control" over Nagorno-Karabakh – to pay €5,500 (\$5,900) in compensation and legal fees. According to the Norwegian-based international religious freedom NGO Forum 18, despite the de facto authorities' ban on registration, there were no reports of interference with religious meetings of members of Jehovah's Witnesses in Nagorno-Karabakh during the year.

The government reported it continued educational reform initiatives, including concerning the teaching of history. In 2021, the government, as part of these larger reforms, approved new standards for public education that removed the course on the history of the Armenian Church from the mandatory curriculum, distributing the course's relevant historical content across a broader curriculum on Armenian studies. The government began to pilot the new standards in the Tavush region in academic year 2021/2022 and 2022/2023. According to the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport, the rest of the country would adopt the new standards through a similar process from 2023/2024 through 2025/2026. Schools would still be able to apply to the ministry to include the class, but the ministry would only approve the request if such a course adhered to the new standards and criteria.

An evangelical group reported that a leading state university did not consider hiring a member of the religious group for a senior position because of her religious affiliation. The group reportedly brought no legal action in connection with the case and did not appeal to the ombudsperson.

Some religious minority groups stated their members had encountered isolated instances of discrimination when dealing with lower-level government officials but noted that the issues were resolved once brought to the attention of supervisors.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Most religious minorities, including Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical Christian groups, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Baha'is, continued to report public attitudes toward them were generally positive and said there was little or no negative media coverage concerning them, although several outlets carried negative stories on them during the year. Some AAC clergy members distributed online videos and gave interviews in which they called religious minority groups "sects" (i.e., cults) and described them as threats to national security. According to

evangelical groups, however, this reflected the attitudes of individual clergy and not the AAC as an institution.

Jehovah's Witnesses reported six instances of verbal abuse against members and attacks on public stands displaying their religious materials following the group's resumption of in-person outreach activities on April 1 after the lifting of the government's COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. In one instance, an AAC priest confronted a group of Jehovah's Witnesses on the street, shouting at them and demanding to know what they would do in the face of the country's enemies. The incident de-escalated after police talked to the priest to calm him down.

On July 24, the opposition-owned Armenia TV station aired a segment during its *Sur Ankyan* (Sharp Angle) program that, according to Jehovah's Witnesses, contained discriminatory, intolerant, and slanderous coverage of the group and other religious organizations that the program labeled as sects. In the program, reporters claimed the groups were controlled from abroad, forced their followers to contribute their earnings to the religious groups' leaders, and practiced "soul-hunting" (proselytizing and forced conversion) by preying on vulnerable individuals in the "post-war" and "post-COVID-19" period. One reporter joined a Jehovah's Witness Bible study under false pretenses and claimed participants who attended with children were hypnotized. As part of the segment, attorney Vahan Hovhannisyanyan stated the children were subjected to psychological terror and turned into "zombies" and "brainwashed." AAC priest Shahe Hayrapetyan, referring to religious minorities, said in the segment that the country was fertile ground for sects that used the Bible selectively to justify themselves, naming Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and Pentecostals as examples. The reporter said religious minorities aimed to destroy the country's national identity and hence represented a threat to national security. On August 22, Jehovah's Witnesses informed the head of the Radio and Television Commission about the program and demanded a retraction from Armenia TV. Failing to receive a retraction, on October 1, Jehovah's Witnesses filed a criminal complaint against Armenia TV. The First Instance Court of Yerevan, however, declined to accept the

case on December 5. At the end of the year, Jehovah's Witnesses reported they were preparing to appeal that decision.

According to an August 26 Public Radio report, the August 23 ombudsperson's appeal to the Constitutional Court to strike down as unconstitutional the prohibition against NSS employees being members of religious groups sparked criticism among the public and unspecified "experts," as well as opposition from the AAC. The report quoted an AAC clergy member as saying that the restrictions were adopted based on security problems facing the country and that those problems remained. According to the same report, the primate of the AAC's Tavush Diocese, Bishop Bagrat Galstanyan, stated that by equating the AAC with other religious organizations, the office of the ombudsperson sought to destroy the spiritual foundation on which Armenian identity was based.

According to leaders of the evangelical Word of Life Church, the church continued to be the object of ongoing hate speech and vilification by anonymous social media accounts opened specifically to target it. The alleged hate speech – including accusations of church links with Azerbaijan and criticism from anti-vaccine groups that it supported COVID-19 vaccination efforts – was posted on various social media platforms, such as Telegram, YouTube, and Facebook. According to the Word of Life Church, the accounts distributing the messages had very few followers initially, but those numbers had increased incrementally during the year.

One local evangelical group reported the general public held cautious to negative attitudes towards their community due to the public's association of the community's advocacy for peace with the government's peace agenda towards Azerbaijan and Turkey. According to the group, evangelicals were viewed as those who "brought the government to power," and hence they were blamed for the government's peace agenda.

Members of the country's evangelical Iranian community continued to report instances of harassment that they believed were orchestrated by Iran's state

security services. Adherents cited incidents of unknown Iranian individuals questioning them about other church members' conversions to Christianity and dates of arrival in Armenia. Church leaders reported persistent harassment and threats to themselves and family members via telephone calls and texts, as well as sporadic threats made in person. One evangelical pastor said that despite his group's reporting such incidents to police, authorities took no visible steps to respond to such threats.

Members of the Jewish community reported a notable decrease in antisemitism compared to the previous year, when antisemitic sentiments had increased after Azerbaijan forces used Israeli-produced weapons during intensive fighting in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in the fall of 2020. A representative of the Jewish community said the hundreds of Jews who had come to the country from Russia since February had reported only positive experiences.

According to civil society experts, after Russia launched its unprovoked war against Ukraine, domestic fringe groups and bloggers affiliated with Russia picked up antisemitic narratives to justify Russia's invasion and to present Armenia's conflict with Azerbaijan as part of a global Jewish conspiracy. Such hate speech, they stated, built on existing conspiracy narratives against a Jewish U.S. citizen businessperson who fringe groups accused of supposedly being anti-Armenian.

According to a Jewish community leader, on April 28 during a rabbi's prayer at a commemoration event near Yerevan's Holocaust and Genocide Memorial, a man cut the electrical wiring feeding the speaker, leading to a short circuit that damaged the sound system. Police apprehended the man, who repented his actions and said he was upset about the prayer and that it was unfair that Israel had not recognized the Armenian genocide. Jewish community representatives said they would not press charges but wanted a public apology and compensation for the damaged equipment, neither of which the man had provided as of mid-December.

On September 29, the Yezidi community celebrated the 10th anniversary of the consecration day of the Quba Mere Diwane Yezidi Temple in the village of Aknalich, Armavir Region, with numerous Yezidis from abroad and government officials in attendance.

A single Shia mosque, located in Yerevan, continued to serve all Muslim groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to advocate religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue during meetings with government officials, including officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, members of parliament, and political party representatives. In a December meeting with the ombudsperson, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom discussed the legal prohibition on “soul-hunting,” the law banning members of the armed forces and security services from being members of religious organizations, and religious education in public schools. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and embassy officials engaged government officials from the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport and the Office of the Human Rights Defender to discuss the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on religious groups and religious sites of significance to Armenian communities. The Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom and embassy officials raised with government officials, including the Prosecutor General’s Office and the ombudsperson, the cases of criminal prosecution of Yezidi and Baha’i leaders and monitored their trials.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly discussed the state of religious freedom in the country with the AAC as well as minority religious groups, including evangelical Christians and other Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Armenian Catholic Church, Yezidis, the Jewish community, Apostolic Assyrians, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, Baha’is, and Muslims. In December, the Ambassador met with Catholicos Karekin to discuss religious education in public schools and interfaith relations. In April, the

Ambassador visited the Assyrian village of Verin Dvin, and in November, the Chargé d’Affaires visited the Baha’i community in Yerevan to express support for religious diversity in the country. Embassy officials attended the 10th anniversary commemoration of the Yezidi Quba Mere Diwane Temple in the village of Aknalich, Armavir Region, to demonstrate support for that community’s religious expression. Embassy officials also discussed religious freedom with human rights NGOs, including addressing religious discrimination faced by members of minority religious groups and the impact of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on religious groups and religious sites that were significant to Armenian communities. In October, the embassy issued a grant to the Jewish Community of Armenia NGO to counter antisemitism in schools and universities.