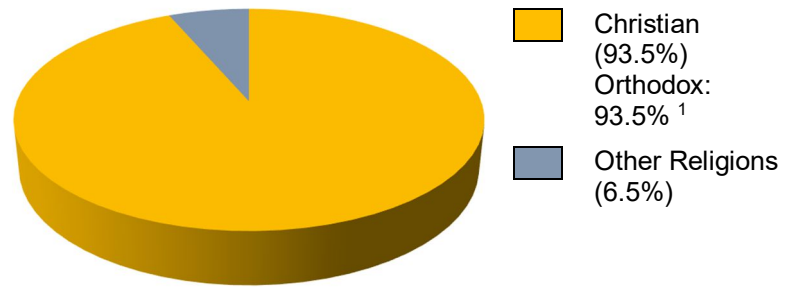


# ARMENIA



<b>Area:</b> 29,700 km <sup>2</sup>	<b>Population:</b> 3,100,000	<b>Political system:</b> Democracy	<b>Major Language(s):</b> Armenian, Russian
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## Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

The constitution guarantees the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and establishes the separation of Church and State. At the same time, the constitution recognises “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 that the right of individuals to practise their religion freely may only be restricted in the interests of public security, health, or morality.

There is no legal necessity for religious groups to register, but only registered groups have legal status. The law also gives details of the rights of religious organisations, which include: ministering to the religious needs of their faithful; performing religious liturgies, rites, and ceremonies; establishing groups for religious instruction; engaging in theological, religious, historical and cultural studies; training clergy for scientific and pedagogical purposes; obtaining and making use of objects and materials of religious significance; accessing the media; establishing ties with religious organisations in other countries; and engaging in charity work.

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 on request. So-called “soul hunting,” a term describing both proselytism and forced conversion is prohibited, but not defined as such by the law.

Government actions affecting minority religious groups included putting pressure on military conscripts to be baptised 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. According to observers, in some cases new conscripts in the military were reluctant to refuse baptism into the Armenian Apostolic faith 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. A compulsory “History of the Armenian Church” course in the school curriculum was criticised by many local experts because of its indoctrinating and proselytizing character. The government stated it had no intention of changing it. Students are not permitted to opt out of the courses.

According to experts, the problem with the course was that it 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, course materials (documents etc) present Protestant movements as a threat 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. The National Institute on Education defended the course by explaining that it had not received complaints from parents about the content of the course.

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

Throughout the year, many 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 places of worship because of “complaints from neighbours” was ongoing. Jehovah’s Witnesses and other religious groups reported that 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.

According to reports from many 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.

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; and to clarify if religious organisations were entitled to legal recognition and had the means to obtain it.<sup>2</sup>

## **Incidents**

According to local media, in July 2014, the Holy Cross chapel of Ijevan (Tavush region) was attacked by a group of vandals who burnt its door and damaged an inscription. Signs bearing the church’s name and the surname of a benefactor who assisted in the chapel’s repairs were erased.

According to the Azeri internet site *azernews.az*, Armenia is intolerant of Islam. After the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, it has allegedly been pursuing a campaign of destroying cultural, historical, Islamic monuments of the Azerbaijani people. Furthermore, the site accuses Armenians of fabricating facts about the monuments of ancient Caucasus Albania. A large number of ancient Albanian scripts, wall designs and crosses have been replaced by Armenian equivalents. Meanwhile, a number of mosques are allegedly being used as store-houses.<sup>3</sup> It is necessary to keep in mind, however, that Azerbaijan is in a state of tension with Armenia and that reports might be biased.

In a 2015 poll by the Stockholm-based World Values Survey, a network of international social scientists, 56.6 percent of the 1,100 Armenians surveyed reportedly expressed intolerance towards religious minorities. Leading members of the governing Republican Party of Armenia (RPA) have also demonstrated flashes of intolerance. On 7<sup>th</sup> October 2015, senior RPA members in parliament called for public television and radio to be used for “fighting against sects”. The media reported RPA department head Vahram Baghdasarian saying: “It is no secret that, under the shadow of democracy, [not inconsiderable] amounts of money enter the country and that [this] money is used to create obstacles for our national values, our traditions, our strong families, our church and, here, Armenian Public TV has a big role to play.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Prospects for Freedom of Religion**

In Armenia there seemed to be a very slight improvement in religious freedom. Nevertheless, religious intolerance both on the societal and political level remained strong. In addition to the hostility against religious minorities in the school curriculum, many media outlets continued to run news stories showing such faith groups to be “enemies of the state”. A survey of mid-level school students found the respondents expressed highly negative attitudes towards religious organisations other than the Armenian Apostolic Church. That said, there seemed to be signs of improvement in that religious groups stated that, compared to previous years, journalists were now portraying their activities more objectively. Several religious organisations reported improved relations with the Armenian Apostolic Church. The Freedom House report for 2015 concludes that freedom of religion is generally respected in Armenia, but it mentions the privileged position of the Armenian Apostolic Church, as well as the societal discrimination sometimes experienced by Jehovah’s Witnesses, Yazidis and other minority faith groups.<sup>5</sup>

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1 Armenian Apostolic Church.

2 <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dld=238516#wrapper>

3 <http://www.azernews.az/aggression/69257.html>

4 <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/76271>

5 <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/armenia>