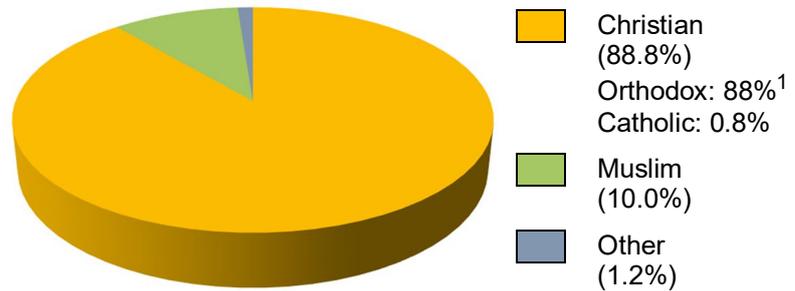


GEORGIA



Area:	Population:	Political system:	Major Language(s):
69,700 km ²	3.7 million	Democracy	Georgian

Legal framework on Freedom of Religion and actual application

Freedom of religion and the separation of church and state are upheld in the constitution. However, laws and policies favour the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), which enjoys privileges not extended to any other religious group. A concordat with the government gives the GOC unique status. The concordat grants rights which include legal immunity for the GOC patriarch, the exclusive right to staff the military chaplaincy, exemption of GOC clergy from military service, and a consultative role in government, especially in education. The GOC has an exclusive right to purchase state property and to privatize state-owned agricultural land free of charge. By law, public schools cannot be used for the purposes of religious indoctrination, proselytizing, or forcible assimilation. There were reports of forced religious conversion however, and at least one incident of violence between police and religious protesters.

The GOC and Jehovah's Witnesses were affected by restrictions on religious activities in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which remained outside the control of the central government. Reliable data from the region is hard to obtain. In South Ossetia, the separatist authorities did not permit services in GOC churches near the ethnic Georgian villages of Nuli, Eredvi, Monasteri, and Gera. Some Jehovah's Witness communities established a working relationship with local authorities, which allowed them to hold some public religious assemblies and conventions. In South Ossetia, Jehovah's Witnesses were not officially recognized and conducted religious services privately; the *de facto* authorities reportedly harassed them on occasion. In Akhmagori, South Ossetia, the local authorities prevented Jehovah's Witnesses from conducting religious activities and their literature was listed as "extremist" by the separatists. Jehovah's Witnesses remained officially banned in Abkhazia.^{2 and 3}

Members of groups comparatively new to the region, including Baptists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses, have faced harassment and intimidation by law enforcement officials and Georgian Orthodox extremists. In 2014, construction of a previously approved prayer house for Jehovah's Witnesses in Terjola was suspended following protests from locals. Since political changes began in Egypt in 2011, there has been an influx of Coptic Christian immigrants. Coptic leaders have complained of incidents in which Orthodox authorities denied Coptic Christians permission to worship in Orthodox churches.⁴

In February 2016, Georgia dropped a proposed anti-blasphemy bill strongly opposed by free speech activists and members of religious minorities. The proposal was to set large fines for insults

to the GOC, although the wording was unclear on what would constitute an offence. The GOC gave apparently contradictory responses to the proposal but in the end distanced itself from it. Individual Orthodox priests saw the bill as too radical and offensive to minorities.⁵

Incidents

Jehovah's Witnesses reported an increase in physical assaults and harassment, including one case where an individual died following surgery. Another incident occurred in Tbilisi on 7th July 2014 when five men destroyed the books of three proselytizing Jehovah's Witnesses, overturned their cart, and beat one of them. Representatives of minority religious groups said many people claimed they threatened the country's cultural values and that they had experienced resistance to their religious activities. A report by the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI) stated GOC clergy contributed to hostile societal attitudes towards minority religious communities.

On 17th June 2014, it was reported that a Georgian had broken the nose of a Jehovah's Witness near a Kingdom Hall in Kutaisi. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that the perpetrator and another man had verbally and physically assaulted them because of their religion, but following an investigation a prosecutor decided that it was not a case of religious intolerance. The prosecutor charged both parties with inflicting bodily injury on the other. According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, during surgery following his injuries, the victim experienced acute respiratory failure and died. On 7th October the perpetrator was convicted of inflicting light bodily injury.

On 10th September 2014, opponents of a new residential madrassah for children in Kobuleti slaughtered a pig in front of the school building and nailed the pig's head to the school's front door. In October 2014 a dispute over a building that once operated as a mosque led to a protest and an altercation between protesters and police in Mokhe, Adigeni municipality of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Local authorities had set aside the site, claimed by both the Muslim and Christian communities in the village, for the construction of a community centre and library.⁶

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

While there is continuing societal discrimination both against religious minorities new to the region and Muslims, the government took steps to improve the situation. In May 2014, the government adopted a National Strategy for the Protection of Human Rights for 2014-2020, which prioritized freedom of religion and the protection of religious minorities. Objectives included establishing legislative guarantees against the discrimination of religious groups, prevention and effective investigation of crimes motivated by religious hatred and intolerance, reinforcement of the principle of secularism in the civil service, compensation for damages inflicted upon religious organizations, promotion of religious equality through the education system, and raising public awareness and levels of tolerance.

¹ Georgian Orthodox: 84%, Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) 4%

² 2002 census

³ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dld=238382#wrapper>

⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2015/georgia>

⁵ <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/77341>

⁶ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2014&dld=238382#wrapper>