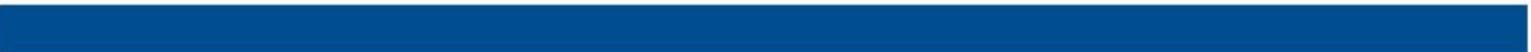




Eurasia Partnership Foundation

Tolerance in Armenia Today: The Perspectives of Religious Tolerance

Occasional Policy Brief



In Fall 2012 a research, commissioned by Eurasia Partnership Foundation, was conducted by Lusine Karamyan and Hovhannes Hovhannisyán (Yerevan State University). Yerevan Press Club (YPC) conducted a media monitoring exercise in August-September 2012.

Methodology

The study consists of two parts – theoretical and practical. The theoretical part makes use of the approaches to tolerance, particularly religious tolerance, advocated by modern theorists. The practical part consists of the results of fieldwork conducted in Yerevan as well as the marzes of Gegharkunik, Shirak and Lori. Twenty two in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of different social groups, particularly religious groups. Ten focus groups were conducted with journalists, medical doctors, educators, psychologists, political and civic activists. Key informant interviews were conducted with 15 experts, particularly specialists in religious studies, ethnic studies and political science as well as active politicians and representatives of state institutions, particularly those officials in judicial bodies who are well informed about the legislative changes relating to religious organizations or those who have had first-hand experience of religious tolerance issues in their professional work. The study has used the results of discussions on the changes to the Law on Conscience and Religious Organizations. The laws, decrees, television programs, articles and blog entries relevant to the issue have been analyzed. The Yerevan Press Club has conducted a media monitoring exercise as.

Tolerance

Tolerance is the appreciation of diversity and the ability to face one's own fears in exercising a fair and objective attitude towards those whose opinions, practices, religion, nationality and so on differ from one's own¹.

According to some researchers, tolerance assumes disagreement, because its object is seen as a morally unjustified or undesirable thing, even if its subject decides not to take any action towards all that which it considers unacceptable. The paradox of tolerance is that on one hand, the individual or person adapts to a disruption of the moral or ethical norms of society, but on the other hand tolerance demands that he or she rejects any attempts to change the situation. From this point of view, tolerance is not uniformly accepted as a value, it constantly requires a set of evidence².

In public discourse, tolerance is often seen as a tool to force something "alien" or "foreign" on someone, as a result of which there is an intolerant attitude towards tolerance itself among some representatives of society. Authoritarian regimes often use the concept of "alien" or "foreign" to plant intolerance in society and to thus make society more controllable.

Tolerance in Armenia

In Armenia over the past few years, some studies have been conducted on the topics of sexual and religious tolerance, mainly with the laws and legal norms taken as starting points. They have not included the attitudes present in the public discourse. Tolerance as a term is used in the public discourse over a wide range, starting from the description of social injustice up to the hate directed at sexual minorities. On the other hand, tolerance is seen as a concept forced or dictated by the West, which is directed at uprooting or destroying Armenian national traditions. Usually, those who express such an opinion are driven by a narrow or marginal nationalism and conservativeness and are unable to go beyond a few primitive examples.

For example, the Diversity March was considered equivalent to a Gay Parade by a small group of nationalists; it was portrayed as a way to submit to a Western "disease" and trample upon Armenian national traditions. Often, legally permissible occurrences and activities are faced with blunt opposition from the public, who consider them to be phenomena that are harmful or in opposition to the national and traditional position.

¹ Peterson S. "Tolerance." *Beyond Intractability*/ Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Posted: July 2003 <<http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/tolerance>>

² See Социология межэтнической толерантности. [The Sociology of Interethnic Tolerance] М., 2003. pg. 16.

In the opinion of many of the respondents, tolerance is a sense of harmony in diversity, which assumes a respectful position towards other practices, behavior, ideas, opinions and worldviews, emotions and beliefs. It assumes a set of rules for cohabitation, which are necessary for the establishment of a healthy society.

According to some of the respondents' views, tolerance is a concept that must be seen in the context of majority vs. minority. It is an attitude shown mainly by the dominating group towards the minority or marginalized group, since in the opposite case the dominant group would not care whether a minority is tolerant or intolerant because it dominates in either case. In other words, the need for a display of tolerance rises when there is a social group whose members are different from the dominant group and the acceptance of those very differences becomes an essential condition for tolerance.

A vast majority of the respondents felt that it was necessary to see tolerance as a two-way process, where on one hand family and other leading social agents facilitate its development in the child and, on the other hand, state policymakers initiate steps that are directed at the formation of a culture of tolerance in society.

The vast majority of experts interpreted tolerance as an important pre-condition for the cohabitation of groups that are different from one another, but many experts pointed out at the same time that it is important to note the context in which this cohabitation was taking place. If it is being seen from the point of view of human rights, for example, then it is natural that tolerance is towards diversity, i.e. tolerance towards people in general and to humankind, including the differences between them. Clearly, in this context, tolerance does not refer in any way to a tolerant position towards crime; in the latter case one must be – on the contrary – intolerant.

In the opinion of some of the experts, it is possible to speak of intolerance on 3 main levels:

1. The individual level, when a common disagreement or argument could lead to hostility or intolerance, or when one's own negative experience with a representative of any minority could become the basis for intolerance towards the whole of that group.
2. The group or community level, which is the occurrence of some groups not accepting others and trying to make their own values dominant over them, combined with the absence of a culture of debate in the groups.
3. The state or broad socio-political level, which often includes radical stereotypes as its basis and a prevalent lack of awareness towards the phenomenon that is outside of the accepted or dominant paradigm, on one hand, and a lack of political will to fix this issue or a defective legislative field, on the other.

There were differing responses to the question of the origins of intolerance. However, the often-repeated causes featured historical, cultural, political and socio-economic factors, including the role of public opinion or that of the community, a low level of public awareness, stereotypes and myths, irrational ideas and baseless fears, which are particularly manifest in the rejection or removal of those differing from the dominant group.

Religious Tolerance

From the surveys conducted in recent years as part of the Caucasus Barometer of the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC), one sees that although the level of public trust towards religious organizations is high, there is nevertheless a tendency towards decline (from 55% in 2008 to 44% in 2011). A majority of respondents belonged to the Armenian Apostolic Church (97% in 2011)³ and considered themselves religious, but the biggest number of those who attended religious ceremonies, at least on feast days, is 29%, and 25% attended them less than once a month. One should use these numbers with caution, because even many deacons do not cite such high number (97% of the population) of followers for the Armenian Apostolic Church, and the methodology of

³ For the sake of comparison, let us note that in 2010, only 83% of respondents noted that they belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church, while this figure was 96% in 2009.

the study shows that many representatives of religious minorities did not participate in the study, considering it to be potentially dangerous. There is a high level of importance given to religion in daily activities (56% in 2011), but 88% of respondents never fasted. This, combined with their low level of church attendance show that in fact Armenian society has a low level of religiousness. At the same time, these surveys have shown that a large part of society thinks that religious or ethnic belonging cannot be an obstacle to political participation, which could be considered a tolerant approach.

In the studies *Religious Education Issues in the Schools of the Republic of Armenia* and *Religious Intolerance in Armenia: Media Monitoring*, a large body of evidence has been collected about the current state of religious tolerance in Armenia⁴. In the Helsinki Committee of Armenia report, a lot of material was gathered about the religious organizations present in Armenia and the attitude towards them⁵. Studies have been conducted on positions towards sexual minorities and the level of tolerance⁶, however it is interesting that no studies have been done on the tolerance of people who hold different political opinions in discussions present in the public discourse.

In Armenia, pseudo-nationalism has reached a level of broad prevalence, through which religious and ethnic belonging are considered to be equivalent. People are intolerant towards those who have different religious views not just for the reason that they consider those views to be wrong from a religious point of view, but also because – based on their perception – those views are a betrayal of the national religion and ethnicity, destabilizing the national unity. Thus, accepting these religious views and allowing the existence of other religious thinking in this case is interpreted as a threat to national security or as treason.

The interviews conducted with the representatives of religious minorities showed that many of the religious minorities have an intolerant attitude towards each other. Sometimes that intolerance is even more pronounced than the one shown by or towards the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC). For example, representatives of the Evangelical Church consider Jehovah's Witnesses to be a sect, but do not accept that the AAC in turn considers them to be a sect.

There are Christian and pseudo-Christian denominations. Jehovah's Witnesses are part of the second group – they are a mixture of Judaism and Christianity, and they even have elements of Islam. The Mormons are a more politicized community; they approach the issue very diplomatically. The thing is that religion has a very strong role in society; it may have been a personal matter in the past but European studies have given a lot of importance to religion and they have understood that it has an important role. It is vital to see what values a religion dictates. Christianity does not preach extremism – this includes the AAC – but a Jehovah's Witness is intolerant and does not allow dialogue, in contrast to the Pentecostals and others. The Orthodox Church denominations are also extremist and, although one does not see that on the level of official relations, they are also intolerant towards the AAC – AAC representative

There are different causes for the intolerance between religious organizations, but one of the revelations of this study is that while a lack of public awareness about a phenomenon can be a major factor for intolerance in

⁴ For more information on this, see the website www.religions.am

⁵ For more information on this, download the report here - http://armhels.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/344eng-Freedom_of_Religion_in_Armenia.pdf

⁶ Karamyan L.V. *Public Awareness and Discrimination towards the LGBT Community: the Situation in Armenia*, Yerevan, Alpha Print, 2011; *Public Attitude towards LGBT Individuals in the Cities of Yerevan, Gyumri and Vanadzor*, Socioscope Societal Research and Consultancy Center NGO, 2011 (in Arm.)

general, in the case of religious intolerance it is the contrary – being well aware of the teachings of another organization can serve as the basis for an attitude of intolerance towards them.

The different branches of the Evangelical Church are Protestant; they are not sects, while Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons are sects. They accept the existence of only one God and reject the Holy Trinity, but this is self-centeredness – egoism - which does not have anything in common with Christian love – *Evangelical Church representative*

There is an attitude of relative tolerance towards atheists – moreover, not only on the part of religious minorities, but also the AAC – because atheists do not particularly preach or spread their beliefs and are not seen as a threat.

One should treat atheists with respect. Without knowing about the existence of God, they have brought a lot of good into this world – *Evangelical Church representative*

In the wider public discourse, the intolerance towards religious organizations is not based on dogmatic religious disagreements, but rather on social and public issues. In particular, the accusations aimed at Jehovah’s Witnesses are based on their anti-social nature – rejecting military service, blood transfusions, and so on. In many cases, the word “sect” is identified with this religious organization specifically and when a Protestant or Evangelical denomination is called a sect, then the accusations of having an anti-social nature that were aimed at the Jehovah’s Witnesses are also leveled against these religious organizations. In general, the most varied and unimaginable accusations are often directed at religious minorities in order to play on the primitive emotions of the public. Such an approach is often used by teachers of the subject History of the Armenian Church who, due to poor training, take it upon themselves to dedicate their class hours to fighting the dissemination of sects in Armenia and thus plant seeds of intolerance towards religious diversity in children at an early age. At the same time, the word “believer” is considered equivalent to the term “sectarian”, and “believers” are usually considered to be those belonging to Evangelical denominations, while followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church avoid identifying themselves as “believers” in order to avoid being equated with “sectarians”.

I have promised myself not to recall what happened to me and not to return to that time, to the extremely intolerant behavior that was displayed against me simply because my religious views and practices differed from the dominant one. They have called me all the names you can think of – scoundrel, thief, traitor to the nation, a person who has nothing in common with Armenians... - *Evangelical Church representative*

AAC does not have a united and clear position on religious freedoms in Armenia. It finds itself in quite a contrasting position because, on one hand, as a Church having a “special” relationship with the state it has to respect the state’s laws and the constitutional provision for freedom of conscience; on the other hand, as a traditional religious structure which has been playing a unique role in the history of the Armenian nation for centuries, it cannot reconcile itself with religious diversity and considers the activities of other religious

organizations as “invasive” and their followers as “occupied property” which will sooner or later return to the fold of the Mother Church⁷.

Many of the AAC clergymen have a differentiated approach to religious organizations. Some of the latter are considered completely unacceptable, which include Jehovah’s Witnesses and sometimes the Mormons and Evangelical denominations, while the acceptable religious organizations are usually the traditional religions, mainly Catholicism, and those churches which do not actively preach or have designs on the spiritual herd of the AAC. The attitude of many of the clergymen of the Armenian Church is based on the Church’s perception of Armenian identity, according to which “an Armenian is the follower of only the Armenian Apostolic Church.”

One of the most extreme expressions of religious intolerance in Armenia consists of the court decisions against representatives of religious minorities for evasion of military service, and the most tolerant approaches consist of rare attempts at religious dialogue. Modern multicultural approaches and their theoretical bases are not as yet familiar to Armenian society, which is why it is still too early to talk about multiculturalism in Armenia.

To me, tolerance is an artificially created concept that is being forced upon us, something to which the whole world is heading so that they can rid themselves of difficulties, conflicts, wars, divide the bounties of the world... but my opinion is that we should spread the Christian value of love and tolerance can be a part of this – *AAC representative*

In the opinion of many of the respondents, one of the factors that make up the foundation of intolerance is the paucity of multicultural interaction and cohabitation. This seems to be characteristic, to some extent, of monoethnic societies. To some respondents, Armenia’s monoethnicity seems to be leading to a cultural catastrophe – the population is leading a closed life and is not interacting with representatives of other nations and cultures (although the existence of such a situation in Armenia today is questionable). Any phenomenon that is outside of the traditional and the widely-accepted is perceived as a danger or a threat, which leads to intolerance on the part of the bearers of the dominant culture in society.

The respondents were of the same opinion regarding the kinds of intolerance most prevalent in Armenia today. These are based on religion, national-ethnic belonging and sexual orientation, as well as discrimination towards disability or being HIV-positive.

In the opinion of many experts, one of the most prevalent kinds of intolerance is on the basis of sexual orientation, which was particularly emphasized over the past year around a number of controversial events. In their everyday life, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual individuals living in Armenia are faced with the fact that homophobia is quite deeply rooted on the societal and institutional levels. The political powers and spiritual leadership which form the government; dominant culture and national identity are not creating the opportunity to recognize diversity in the sense of sexual orientation and gender identity. An objective lack of information about LGBT individuals, their needs, relationships and lifestyles creates fertile ground for intolerance towards them. One can conclude by saying that the basis of intolerance is the low level of public awareness about the phenomenon which is outside the accepted heteronormative paradigm.

Media Monitoring about Religious Tolerance

The YPC study consisted of three parts – a study of international conventions and other documents as well as the articles in national legislation guaranteeing freedom of conscience, a summary of previously conducted studies on intolerance and a two-month long monitoring of the media.

⁷ This viewpoint was expressed by Father Vardan Navasardyan, Director of the Christian Education Center of the Armenian Apostolic Church, at the presentation ceremony for the book *Religious Education Issues in the Schools of the Republic of Armenia*, held on 31 July 2012 at Erebuni Hotel.

In 2010, the UN General Assembly adopted the resolution on the “Elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion or belief”, which also addressed the relationship between the media and religion. The resolution welcomed initiatives by the media to promote tolerance and respect for religious and cultural diversity, at the same time condemning any advocacy of discrimination, hostility or violence in the use of print, audiovisual or electronic media or any other means.

In 2001, by becoming a member of the Council of Europe, the Republic of Armenia took on a series of responsibilities, including ratifying the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and providing all the rights outlined by it. International legislative acts, which have been ratified by Armenia at different times and have become a component of Armenian law, in addition to Armenian legislation, are subject to execution and must be observed by all individuals and organizations in the country, including the media. A number of international actors have noted that the right to religious freedom in the country is deficient, urging the Armenian authorities to make the necessary legislative changes.

YPC monitored the coverage of religious issues by the media for the period from 18 November 2011 to 25 July 2012. 10 media outlets were chosen for the study, including three television channels (Armenian Public Television Channel One – H1, Shoghakat—the religious channel, and Yerkir Media), one radio station (ArmRadio FM 107), three newspapers (*Haykakan Jamanak*, *Azg* and *Golos Armenii*) and three online publications (Lragir.am, Hetq.am and Panorama.am). The study of material from each media outlet covered a period of four weeks, but in order to have a longer-term picture, each of the media sources was examined at different points over an eight-month period.

Based on consultations with the experts, a list was compiled of stereotypes and convictions characteristic of the attitude by Armenian citizens towards religion, religious denominations and religious communities. The media material studied was also analyzed for the presence of these stereotypes and convictions, and the frequency of their usage was calculated. The sources of information were noted, as were also the subjects of the stereotypes and convictions. An important element in the study was defining the position of the media outlet or the author of the piece containing relevant stereotypes and convictions.

The volume of studied media material includes 1020 pieces which have touched on religious issues in one way or another, but only 96 of them (less than 10%) contained value-based convictions and stereotypes towards religions, religious denominations and religious communities. On one hand, these numbers suggest a relatively neutral position by the Armenian mass media towards religious issues. They have covered these stories primarily from an informational and current affairs point of view.

At the same time, an analysis of the studied material shows that in the media – and consequently in the public discourse – there are attitudes which allow one to speak of the “tense reactions” to the topic of religion. This relates in the first place to emphasizing the exclusive role of the AAC. The coverage also expressed the intentions of protecting the status of the AAC from external threats. The tendency to protect the nation from external threats was reflected mostly in materials covering religious denominations and communities which have been defined as “sectarian” or “sects”. Moreover, as a rule these concepts are used for all those religious denominations and communities which do not fit the traditional, generalized perception of global religions.

The convictions registered in the study (a part of which has taken on a stereotypical nature, due to the rise in the value of the AAC and the negative role of the “sects”) are united – despite all their differences – by the tendency to protect the national and spiritual identity from external threats, as mentioned above. This is the main motivation that dominates in the attitudes towards the other religions and the manifestations of religious intolerance by the Armenian mass media.

Preliminary Recommendations

- To use legal and administrative means to prohibit the presence in elementary educational institutions of courses, teaching manuals or textbooks which advocate intolerance or discrimination or facilitate their advocacy, as well as teachers who may have such views.
- To raise the level of awareness in people through various means towards tolerance, its positive and negative aspects, as well as the modern manifestations of intolerance – fascism, ultra-nationalism and numerous other radical phenomena.
- To use seminars and workshops to raise the level of awareness and knowledge among opinion formers and especially journalists regarding various religious organizations, the differences among them and other facts if the lack of their knowledge may form the basis for intolerance, which may in turn lead to calls for religious hatred, hostility or discrimination, or insults directed at religious feelings or human dignity.
- To exclude elements of religious hatred – or intolerance and discrimination in general – from the speeches and announcements made by political figures or state officials.
- To take into consideration the joint opinion of the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR when making reforms to the Republic of Armenia Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations as well as the recommendations made during discussions with religious organizations currently operating in Armenia, in order to avoid possible conflicts on religious grounds or the encouragement of intolerance.
- To organize programs on television and radio which facilitate a rise in tolerance in society, particularly among those individuals who have a significant role in the formation of public opinion.
- To take steps in clarifying and addressing the link between the “feeling of a lack of safety and security for our national identity” and the concept of religious intolerance; in other words, to take specific steps to increase the public’s sense of security.

Thus, the cornerstones for the development of tolerance are mainly public awareness and the dissemination of objective information, education policies and programs, healthy and reliable television programming and media operations as well as significant reforms related to political security.

Authorship and Disclaimer

This analysis has been conducted by lead experts on religious tolerance, Lusine Karamyan and Hovhannes Hovhannisyan, at the request of the Eurasia Partnership Foundation (EPF) as part of its Promoting Religious Tolerance in Armenia program, with the support of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The conclusions are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of EPF and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.



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