



Stepan Danielyan

The situation of the freedom of religion in Armenia

We are greatly concerned about the situation of freedom of conscience in Armenia which has deteriorated recently. This fact is blatantly illustrated by publications in press and other mass media, especially the ones controlled by the authorities. All these media sources label religious organizations other than Armenian Apostolic church as sects, and the members of these organizations as sectarians. TV channels have also adopted this derisive definition, inculcating it into the people's minds. No measures are taken by the authorities in order to improve this situation; on the contrary, they propagandize this discriminating attitude towards the religious organizations other than Armenian Apostolic church. Sometimes this propaganda may include direct calls to violence. For example the organization "Mek Azg" /One Nation/ has leafleted the whole country. These leaflets pose a serious threat to freedom of conscience, as all religious organizations in Armenia other than the Apostolic church are declared as „spies" whose activity may lead to the wreck of the country.

Moreover the leaflets contained direct calls to violence but nobody was officially charged with this case. The leader of this organization freely expresses his stance in press in different interviews.

Law enforcement agencies apply hidden pressures to prevent religious organizations from conducting meetings and holding religious ceremonies. The directors of the hotels and conference halls refuse to give venues to religious organizations even if it is arranged by preliminary agreements and the payment is made in advance. They allude to "unexpected change of circumstances".

Numerous are cases in public school when at classes of the "History of Armenian Apostolic Church" teachers made a laughingstock of children holding to other religious convictions. In a sense nearly all teachers of public schools are engaged in the struggle against religious organizations.

The atmosphere of intolerance resulted in changes made in the law "On the freedom of conscience and on religious organizations" adopted on March 19 in the first reading. This draft law tends to serve as a legislative ground for the restrictions of religious freedoms in Armenia, as it is assumed that special provisions may be added to The Criminal Code intended to have punishment procedures for proselytism. These provisions do not refer to the clear cut definition "improper proselytism". And thus this restriction can be applied to any religious activity. The draft law also suggests that the procedure of registration of religious organizations should be more stringent. As a result of this a ban on all operation and activity without registration is quite plausible. The law also defines the essence of Christianity in accordance with Nikeya declaration in order to force some organizations into refusal of being registered as

“non-Christians”. The new registration order may prevent some religious organizations from registering and bring an end to their activity. On the whole the draft law includes many articles intended to restrict religious freedoms.

On March 2 the Speaker of Armenian Parliament submitted a request to the Council of Europe to provide an opinion on the compatibility of draft law with international standards. The Venice Commission, The Directorate /General of Human Rights and Legal Affairs of the Council of Europe, OSCE/ODHIR sent their opinion to the Parliament /the joint opinion is already posted in CoE /VC website/. We were unable to get any explanations from the officials and our organization has serious concerns about the recent developments. For example certain events that recently took place in several regions of Armenia come to prove that the above mentioned draft amendment is put into force long before it is adopted by the Parliament.

In June 2009 in Gyumri the national security officials threatened the members of the organization “The World Service of Christian Culture” of the Armenian Evangelic church and forced them to come to the meeting where they were accused of proselytism /not defined by law/. The members were subjected to scorn and mockery at the national security office. Later after a number of publications in press the officials stopped the persecution.

In May 2009 the bishop of the diocese of the Armenian Apostolic church in Lori region had a meeting with the headmasters of schools and kindergartens and in the presence of the mayor of the region instructed the incumbents “to fight the sectarianism and its followers” the mayor also joined the religious leader in his efforts to combat sectarianism. On the next day the teachers made a list if children whose parents were members of other religious organisations and threatened them with various punishments in case they attended any religious ceremonies other than held by Armenian Apostolic Church. There were several publications in press on this issue but no official response from state authorities.

Nevertheless, the situation in Armenia is much more favourable as compared with other countries of the region. No pressure is exercised on ethnic minorities (also on religious grounds). Armenia is not involved in extremist religious movements; the population is traditionally very tolerant towards people professing other religions, so the situation in Armenia in a sense is far better than in some European countries. The above mentioned cases though /the list can be continued/ are intended to artificially create religious tension. Our major concern is that such discriminating approach tends to become a state policy. We can mention two reasons for a shift in national policy:

1. after the last elections in Armenia state authorities lack legitimacy and try to raise their profile and legitimacy rating in public by prioritizing “national ideology and national religion”.

2 Armenian Apostolic church has no social support and social standing, so it tries to get the support of the state in order to expand its influence in various spheres being unable to awake the flagging interest of its congregation towards religion.

This is proved by an amendment in the new draft law made to the provision “prohibits the participation of the Church in governing the State and shall not impose any governmental function on the Church “which reads” except for the cases prescribed by law”.

This can lead to confusion in the delegation of authorities of the State and the Church which contradicts the Constitution of the RA.

If adopted this draft law also may endanger the situation in many Post-soviet states with serious problems in religious mosaic, as it can work as an objectionable precedent.