



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

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Inventing Tradition: Religion and Democratization in Armenia and Georgia

Topic of Research

My research examines the role of religion in democratic transition in Armenia and Georgia. The influx of foreign religious organizations into these countries since the collapse of the Soviet Union has raised questions about state support of religion, the protection of minority rights, and the place of religion in society. I study how religious groups aid or hinder the transition process, and how the legislative and social context in which they operate affects their political activities. Instead of focusing on religious doctrine as the main motivation for political action, I examine organizational structures—both internal group organization and the organization of the general society—to understand how group structure and inter-group competition change the goals, methods, and activities of religious groups in the political arena. Since the communist legacy has left a large imprint on the religious situation in every former Soviet republic, I also consider historical context and explore how it frames groups' own ideas about themselves and societal ideas about the role of tradition in contemporary religious relations.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field

The question of the role of religion in democratic society is important to scholars and policymakers alike. There is still much disagreement about the proper role of religious groups in a democracy, particularly in countries that are still establishing democratic institutions and developing democratic norms. Understanding how different types of legislation and societal organization affect the activities of religious groups will help

policymakers develop laws that both protect rights and encourage participation in society. Furthermore, knowing the attitudes and philosophy of different religious organizations toward democracy and their ideas about their role in a democratic society is important in understanding why some religions are more politically active than others. Because the South Caucasus region has had a history of religious pluralism as well as religious strife, my research will help to increase understanding of religious relations, which is vital to understanding how society will respond to programs related to democratic transition.

Approach and Methodology (incl. Research Sites)

During my grant period, I conducted formal interviews of religious leaders, government officials, scholars and people who work in NGOs. I asked religious leaders about the structure and activities of their religious organizations, as well as questions about their relationship with government, their role in society, and whether they were engaged in political activities. I asked government officials about the legal framework surrounding religious liberty and about the structures in place to remedy violations of religious rights. Scholars and NGO workers were able to offer a more general background to the religious situation in each country and help with establishing important contacts related to my research. While I came to each interview prepared with questions tailored to the person with whom I was meeting, I also allowed interview subjects the opportunity to speak about the subjects they felt were most important for them. One question I did ask of all interview subjects in both Armenia and Georgia was to comment on the role they think religion should play in a democratic society. The variety of answers I received reflected a conflict that is inherent in the concept of democracy itself.

In Armenia, I conducted 14 formal interviews in Yerevan and Etchmiadzin. In Georgia I conducted 20 formal interviews in Tbilisi. I also had several informal discussions with local residents and foreign workers in each country. Because my research is related to religion, I visited church services of various denominations in each country to observe religious rituals and to count the number of participants in the various services. Finally, I collected a random sample of newspaper and magazine articles from local publications that document societal attitudes toward religious relations. These articles are evidence of mainstream attitudes toward minority religions in particular, and help to paint a picture of the type of atmosphere that exists in each country with respect to the presence of new and minority religious organizations.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

My conclusions are preliminary, but after spending one month each in Armenia and Georgia, I believe that the two main obstacles to cementing religious liberty in these countries are legislative and societal. Legislatively, each country has a democratic constitution that provides for adequate protection of religious rights. However, each country has since adopted legislation that is contradictory to protection of these rights, and thus does not sufficiently or equally protect religious minorities. The second obstacle relates to societal attitudes toward religion. The Soviet legacy seems to have done little in erasing the role of religion from people's lives in both Armenia and Georgia. Religion holds an important place in each society, but religious pluralism is a concept little understood. Even in Georgia, which has a history of religious pluralism, the Georgian Orthodox Church and the government have been successful in asserting the dominant position of the Orthodox Church in the country. I have found that in order to improve the protection of religious freedom in these two countries and to decrease the number of violations of liberty, it is

important to insist that each country develop legislation that is consistent with democratic constitutions and with international conventions on human rights. Second, it is necessary to work on the more difficult task of changing societal attitudes, mostly through education. The media is an important contributor to religious intolerance in both countries and development of an independent media will also help to improve religious relations.

Suggestions for Future Research Agendas

In the future, I think it would be useful to look more closely at a few different aspects of the religious situation in both Armenia and Georgia. First, it would be necessary to do close examination of the legal framework in each country, including examination of draft legislation and parliamentary debates around these drafts, to fully understand the legal debates surrounding protection of religious freedom in these countries. Second, a more in-depth and systematic study of media coverage of religious issues would present a fuller picture of the effect of the press on shaping public attitudes toward religious tolerance. Finally, it would be useful to perform interviews outside of the capital cities in both Armenia and Georgia, as many ethnic and religious minorities live in the regions and are faced with different issues than those living in the main cities of each country.

A topic related to my current research and which I plan to pursue in greater detail in the future concerns religious education. In both Armenia and Georgia, the majority church has some control over the content of religious education offered in schools. I propose taking a closer look at the content of religious education in each country, and the actual influence that the churches have had in choosing that content. I would also speak with the teachers who are in charge of religious education to find out about their training and attitudes toward teaching religion. Finally, I would research whether there are other types of education offered, such as classes on tolerance and equality, and what the content of those classes is.

Policy Recommendations

One of the recommendations I had suggested to me by many smaller religious groups in both Armenia and Georgia was to increase monitoring of religious liberty violations by international organizations, particularly ones that are connected to governments. Many cited the U.S. State Department reports on International Religious Freedom to be integral in making instances of religious extremism and abuse of religious liberty known to the international community.

Based on my conversations with NGO employees who work on training youth and community leaders on minority rights and civic activism, I believe it is important to develop educational programs in conjunction with local school authorities to give children and teens civic education and teach them about tolerance, equality and human rights. I heard many complaints from NGO workers that people do not understand the ideas of democracy, freedom or liberty in any meaningful way.

Another recommendation to help change intolerant societal attitudes is to provide press monitoring and training of journalists in these two countries. While there are a few such programs, there is a need for more. In both Armenia and Georgia, from reading newspaper articles, watching television news programs, and speaking with locals, it was evident that the press helps to contribute to intolerance in each country. Minority religious groups are given little or no opportunity to be heard through the media, while the Apostolic Church in

Armenia and the Orthodox Church in Georgia (both majority religious groups) are featured daily. Editorials foment intolerance and news articles are biased against minority groups.