

MEXICO 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states all persons are free to profess their chosen religious beliefs and to engage in ceremonies and acts of worship. The legislature may not enact laws that establish or prohibit any religion. The constitution provides for the separation of religion and state and defines the country as secular. Government, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and religious representatives stated enforcement of the constitutional right of religious freedom sometimes conflicted with the constitutional right to autonomy provided to indigenous communities. There were reports of local leaders pressuring Protestants to convert through forced displacement, arbitrary detention, and destruction of property in some rural and indigenous communities.

The Catholic Multimedia Center (CMC) reported that priests and other religious leaders in some parts of the country continued to be targeted and received extortion attempts, death threats, and intimidation, often from organized criminal groups. As of the end of the year, investigations were ongoing regarding the deaths of two priests, Father Erasto Pliego de Jesus from Puebla and Francisco Javier Gutierrez Diaz from Guanajuato. In June three nuns were reportedly tied up, gagged, and assaulted by unknown attackers in their parish home in the state of Oaxaca. NGOs, including some religious organizations, reported that in some rural and indigenous communities, inhabitants were pressured to adhere to the majority religion, including paying for, and participating in, community and religious gatherings.

U.S. embassy and consulate representatives and other U.S. government officials met with the government to discuss concerns about violence toward religious leaders and reports of discrimination toward Protestants in some states. Embassy officers also met with members of religious groups and NGOs to gather details about specific cases. During the U.S.-Mexico Human Rights Dialogue on October 21, high level officials from the Department of State underscored the importance of protecting human rights defenders, including religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 121.7 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2010 government census, approximately 83 percent identifies as Roman Catholic and 5 percent as evangelical Protestant. Religious

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groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include other Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and Muslims. More than 2 percent of the population reports practicing a religion not otherwise specified, and nearly 5 percent report not practicing any religion.

Official statistics sometimes differ from the membership figures provided by religious groups. Approximately 315,000 individuals identify themselves as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) in the 2010 census; however, Mormon officials state their membership is approximately 1.3 million. There are large Protestant communities in the southern States of Chiapas and Tabasco. In Chiapas, evangelical leaders state nearly half of the state's 2.4 million inhabitants are members of evangelical groups, but fewer than 5 percent of 2010 census respondents in Chiapas self-identified as evangelical.

According to the 2010 census, the Jewish community numbers approximately 67,500, some 42,000 of whom live in Mexico City and the State of Mexico. There are also small numbers of Jews in Morelos, Nuevo Leon, Oaxaca, Puebla, and Veracruz. Nearly half of the country's approximately 4,000 Muslims are concentrated in Mexico City and the State of Mexico. Roughly half of the approximately 100,000 Mennonites are concentrated in the State of Chihuahua. Some indigenous persons adhere to a syncretic religion combining Catholic and pre-Hispanic Mayan beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states all persons are free to profess their chosen religious beliefs and to engage in ceremonies and acts of worship. The Congress may not enact laws that establish or prohibit any religion. The constitution also provides for the separation of religion and state and defines the country as secular. It prohibits any form of discrimination, including on the basis of religion. A constitutional amendment specifically prohibits the use of acts of worship for political purposes. The amendment allows for religious services to take place "in public as well as private" places, and added "freedom of ethical convictions" to the constitution, intended to guarantee the freedom to have no religious faith.

Under the law, religious groups are permitted to operate informally without registering with the government. In accordance with the constitution, however,

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religious groups must be registered to negotiate contracts and purchase or rent land, apply for official building permits, receive tax exemptions, and hold religious meetings outside their customary places of worship. To establish a religious association, applicants must certify that the church or religious group observes, practices, propagates, or instructs a religious doctrine or body of religious beliefs; has conducted religious activities in the country for at least five years, thus becoming deeply rooted within the population; has established domicile in the republic; shows sufficient assets to achieve its purpose; has established statutes; and has met constitutional provisions. Registered associations may freely: organize their internal structures and adopt bylaws or rules governing their authority and operating system, including the training and appointment of their clergy; engage in religious public worship and propagate their doctrine, within applicable regulations; celebrate all acts for the fulfillment of the association's purpose that are lawful and not for the purpose of making a profit; and participate alone or associated with individuals or corporations in the creation, management, maintenance, and operation of private welfare, educational, and health institutions, provided they are not for profit and are legal.

Under the law, religious associations must notify the government of their intention to hold a religious meeting outside a licensed place of worship. Religious associations may not hold political meetings of any kind.

The law requires religious groups to apply for a permit to construct new buildings or to convert existing buildings into houses of worship. Any religious building constructed after 1992 is the property of the religious group that built it. All religious buildings erected before 1992 are classified as part of the national patrimony, owned by the state, and exempt from taxes.

The constitution states public education must be secular, but religious groups are permitted to operate private schools. The law takes no position on primary-level homeschooling for religious reasons; however, to enter a secondary school, a student must have attended an accredited primary school. Homeschooling is allowed at the secondary level after completion of schooling at an accredited primary school.

According to the constitution, indigenous communities have the right to autonomy and may “decide their internal forms of coexistence” and have legal systems to “regulate and solve their internal conflicts.” These rights are subject to the general

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principles and fundamental rights provided by the constitution, including freedom of religion.

The federal government coordinates religious affairs through the Interior Ministry (SEGOB). Within SEGOB, the General Directorate for Religious Associations (DGAR) promotes religious tolerance, conducts conflict mediation, and investigates cases of religious intolerance. The National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) is an autonomous federal agency responsible for ensuring the rights of nondiscrimination and equal opportunity, including for minority religious groups.

In addition to federal government offices, each of the country's 32 states has administrative offices with responsibility over religious affairs. The States of Chiapas, Guerrero, Yucatan, and Oaxaca have undersecretaries for religious affairs.

If a party presents a dispute based on allegations of religious intolerance, the DGAR is charged with mediating a solution. If mediation fails, the parties may submit the issue to the DGAR for binding arbitration. If the parties do not agree to this procedure, one or the other may seek judicial redress.

The constitution bars members of the clergy from holding public office; advocating partisan political views; supporting political candidates; or publicly opposing the laws or institutions of the state.

Under the law, religious groups may not own or administer radio or television stations. Government permission is required for commercial radio or television to transmit religious programming.

Government Practices

Some evangelical groups stated that incidents of religiously-based abuses and discrimination occurred, and the government either did not respond or did not respond adequately. There were reports of Protestants being forcibly under pressure to convert, displaced, arbitrarily detained, as well as having their property destroyed by local leaders in the States of Chiapas and Oaxaca. Some members of indigenous communities stated local authorities denied them public benefits and utilities service due to their religious affiliation. Government, NGO, and religious representatives stated that enforcement of the constitutional right of religious

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freedom sometimes conflicted with the constitutional right to autonomy provided to indigenous communities.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reported that in March the village delegate in Chichiltepec, Hidalgo, Jesus Dominguez Hernandez, attempted to force Casto Hernandez Hernandez to renounce his Protestant faith. According to this report, when he refused, and after his cousin Juan Placido Hernandez Hernandez expressed support for him, both were expelled from the village and imprisoned without water for nearly 30 hours. According to local NGO Impulso 18, the individuals immediately filed a case with the Hidalgo State Human Rights Commission (CDHEH) and with the state attorney general in Huejutla de los Reyes. Impulso 18 also reported, despite what they viewed as strong evidence, the case was delayed. Hernandez told CSW that he had received pressured from government officials to drop the case. Officials from the state attorney general's office said they would make a final decision about whether they would pursue the case on November 5. According to CSW, due to a change of personnel at the state attorney general's office, the decision was postponed.

NGO lawyer and advocate Luis Herrera, the Director of the Coordination of Christian Organizations (COOC) and the Voice of the Martyrs-Mexico, stated that in June local government officials and village leaders seized the land of 30 Protestant families in Mariano Matamoros, Chiapas, after cutting off their water and sewage services. International Christian Concern (ICC) reported another incident on October 15, when village leaders raided 15 acres of farmland owned by Protestants, leaving more than two dozen families, including more than 40 children, without access to food. In January the state government negotiated and signed an agreement that stated Protestants would have their confiscated land returned to them; however, CSW reported the agreement was not implemented. In March village authorities signed a new decree preventing Protestants from buying or selling in the village. CSW reported that village authorities announced they would decide whether the Protestant community could continue to live in Mariano Matamoros during a village assembly in December; however, the decision was postponed until January 2016. According to ICC reports, these separate incidents were part of an ongoing effort since 2012 to pressure the Protestants to convert back to Catholicism or leave the area altogether.

ICC released an article stating that Impulso 18 and Luis Herrera said that on December 15, Protestants in Las Margaritas, Chiapas, were asked to present themselves during a village assembly and sign a document confirming they had

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renounced their faith. Herrera also told CSW that seven Protestants were imprisoned for two days and were ordered to pay a fine for refusing to renounce their faith. Municipal, state, and federal officials were reportedly notified, but an investigation had not yet been opened as of the end of the year. According to Herrera and CSW, a follow-up meeting of the parties concerned was scheduled for January 2016.

An article released by CSW in September reported local authorities in the village of La Chachalaca, Oaxaca, imprisoned Lauro Nunez Perez, a Protestant, three times since July for refusing to convert to Catholicism. The Oaxaca state ombudsman reported that a member of the local government prevented the children of Nunez Perez from enrolling in the village school. The ombudsman opened an investigation of the case in July, which remained open as of the end of the year.

According to CSW, on July 7, authorities in the village of Tzetelton, Chiapas, arrested and detained Andres Lopez and Virginia Lopez for three days because they converted to Protestantism. The village authorities reportedly arrested, but did not detain, their three minor children for the same reason. Herrera told CSW that a 2014 village covenant prohibited conversion to Protestantism, considering it a crime punishable by a fine, forced labor, or expulsion from the community. Herrera also reported that on July 10 the couple was released from detention and allowed to return to the village after the Chiapas State government negotiated an agreement with village leaders.

ICC estimated over 70 cases of religious freedom violations remained open in the five States of Chiapas, Hidalgo, Oaxaca, Puebla, and Guerrero. The NGO also stated these cases affected communities of between 20 and 100 people.

The federal government stated it promoted permanent dialogue with religious actors to ensure the exercise of religious freedom and to resolve conflicts arising from religious intolerance. On September 1, SEGOB released its annual report, which cited the federal government's role in adjudicating seven cases of religious intolerance in the States of Chiapas, Mexico, Hidalgo, Michoacan, Oaxaca, and Puebla between September 2014 and July 2015. According to SEGOB, as of September one case in Oaxaca was resolved while the other six cases remained in process.

CONAPRED conducted outreach efforts, facilitated training, and distributed publications designed to combat discrimination based on religion. CONAPRED

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also received complaints of discrimination based on religious beliefs and assisted in conflict mediation.

In September the Chiapas State government reported offering workshops to educate people on religious diversity and to promote religious tolerance. The DGAR worked closely with state and local officials on criminal investigations of cases involving religious groups. Municipal and state officials commonly mediated disputes among religious groups; however, officials rarely pursued legal remedies against offending local leaders. There were few investigations and prosecutions related to crimes or abuses motivated by an individual's belief or practice.

As of the end of the year, the DGAR had registered a total of 8,311 religious associations throughout the country. Most were Christian (8,274, an increase of 250 from 2014), followed by Buddhist (13), Jewish (10), New Expressions (8, a decrease of 4 from 2014), Hindu (2), Islamic (2), and Krishna (2).

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to NGOs and press reports, priests and other religious leaders continued to be targeted for their humanitarian work and were the victims of extortion attempts, death threats, and intimidation by organized criminal groups.

On November 14, Father Erasto Pliego de Jesus, who served at a parish in the State of Puebla, was kidnapped and killed. His body found two days later with signs of head injuries and burns. Some NGOs stated he was targeted by an organized criminal group. According to press reports, the Puebla Attorney General's Office opened an investigation into the case, which remained open at year's end.

On April 6, Francisco Javier Gutierrez Diaz, a Catholic priest from Guanajuato, was robbed and killed by a shot in the head by unknown assailants after leaving his parish. Some religious organizations stated his death was related to his role as a priest. An investigation was opened but there were no updates as of the end of the year.

On June 29, three nuns were reportedly tied up, gagged, and assaulted by unknown assailants in their parish home in Matias Romero, Oaxaca. The nuns – Enedina Bertha Rincon, Juana Guzman, and Enedina Avila Hernandez – were attacked nine months after an assault on the parish priest, Father Victorino Lopez Nolasco, in the

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same village. In both cases, the victims were held hostage for a number of hours. In a statement released on June 30, the bishop of Tehuantepec condemned the attacks. A Catholic organization stated an investigation was opened but had not been pursued as of the end of the year.

On April 8, the Citizen Observatory for Protection of Human Rights Defenders – a joint program between the World Organization against Torture and the International Federation for Human Rights – demanded the government protect priest Marcelo Perez from Simojovel, Chiapas, who had received death threats and harassment for his work.

According to the CMC, criminal groups attempted to intimidate priests by threatening their parishioners. It reported the most dangerous states for priests were Veracruz, Mexico State, and Guerrero. The CMC stated there was a decrease in the number of priests killed, from six in 2014 to two; however, approximately 520 priests were reportedly victims of extortion during the year. The fate of Father Carlos Ornelos Puga, who disappeared in November 2013 from La Victoria, Tamaulipas, and Father Santiago Alvarez Figueroa, who disappeared in December 2012 in Zamora, Michoacan, remained unknown.

NGOs, including some religious organizations, reported that many rural and indigenous communities expected inhabitants to adhere to the majority religion, including paying for, and participating in, community and religious gatherings. There were reports of those adhering to the minority religious group being discriminated against by others within the community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy and consulate representatives met with government officials responsible for religious and indigenous affairs at the federal and state levels, raising concerns regarding the deaths of Catholic priests, threats against Catholic nuns, and reported abuses toward evangelical Christians.

Embassy officers also met with members of religious groups and religiously affiliated NGOs to discuss safety for priests working on humanitarian issues, to assess the status of religious freedom, and to express support for religious tolerance.

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An officer from the Department of State Office of International Religious Freedom visited Mexico City and Oaxaca in September to raise concerns about the treatment of minority religious groups within indigenous communities and violence toward priests from criminal groups.

During the U.S.-Mexico Human Rights Dialogue on October 21, high level officials from the Department of State underscored the importance of protecting human rights defenders, including religious leaders.