

# GUATEMALA

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. Access to Mayan historical sites by Mayan spiritual groups continued to be somewhat contentious.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy monitored religious freedom, and embassy officers met regularly with leaders of religious groups.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

There is no official census of religious affiliation. The Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference of Guatemala has estimated that 65 to 70 percent of the population is Catholic. Alianza Evangelica, the official umbrella organization for Protestants, has estimated that 35 to 40 percent of the population is Protestant. The largest Protestant group is the Full Gospel Church, followed by the Assemblies of God, the Central American Church, and the Prince of Peace Church, as well as many independent evangelical groups. Other religious groups include Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Russian Orthodox, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Approximately 2,000 Jews and a small Muslim population reside primarily in Guatemala City.

Catholics and Protestants are present throughout the country, and their adherents are found among all major ethnic groups and political parties. According to leaders of Mayan spiritual organizations and Catholic and Protestant missionaries, many indigenous Catholics and some Protestants also practice some form of indigenous spiritual ritual.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. There is no state religion; however, the constitution recognizes explicitly the distinct legal personality of the Catholic Church. The constitution also confirms the rights of indigenous groups to practice their traditions and desired forms of cultural expression, which often include religious rites.

According to the constitution, no member of the clergy of any religion may serve as president.

The government neither establishes requirements for religious recognition nor imposes registration requirements for believers to worship together. However, the government requires religious organizations, as well as nonreligious associations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), to register as legal entities to conduct business such as renting or purchasing premises and entering into contracts, and to receive tax-exempt status. Registration fees are waived for religious groups.

The Catholic Church is not required to register. Any other religious group may file a copy of its bylaws and a list of its initial membership with the Ministry of Government to receive formal recognition. The group must have at least 25 initial members, and the bylaws must reflect an intention to pursue religious objectives. Applications are rejected only if the organization does not appear to be devoted to a religious objective, appears intent on undertaking illegal activities, or engages in activities that appear likely to threaten public order.

Foreign missionaries must obtain tourist visas, which are issued for renewable periods of three months. After renewing their tourist visas once, they may apply for temporary residence.

The constitution permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools. There is no national framework for determining the nature or content of religious instruction; when provided, it tends to be programmed at the local level. The Ministry of Education consults with religious groups on the integration of general values focusing on good citizenship, although not specific religious teachings, into school curricula.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter, and Christmas. The Virgin of the Assumption is the patron saint of Guatemala City, and the Feast of the Assumption is a local holiday.

## **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

While registered religious entities are legally exempt from taxes, Protestant leaders noted that local officials sometimes required their churches to pay property taxes. There were no reports that the government rejected any group's application for registration.

Although the law permits Mayan spirituality groups to conduct religious ceremonies at Mayan historical sites on government-owned property, some Mayan leaders have stated government practices limited their access to some religious sites, since many Mayan archeological sites are now national parks or protected areas. All visitors, including Mayans, must pay admission fees and were limited in performing their religious exercises in these areas. At some sites, Mayans must apply in advance for permission to hold ceremonies. Other natural, sacred Mayan sites, such as caves, lagoons, mountains, and forests, are on privately owned land, and worshippers at times were denied access. Mayan leaders have stated that because of these restrictions, they did not have the same open access to their places of worship as adherents of other religions and have argued that they should have unrestricted access to all sacred sites (an estimated 2,000), as well as the right to manage and protect them.

Some evangelical leaders have asserted government initiatives aimed at protecting and promoting indigenous cultures gave Mayan spiritual groups preferential political treatment by financially supporting programs for indigenous cultural activities, which often included religious ceremonies.

## **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Representatives of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish groups, as well as traditional Mayan spirituality groups, participated in the Interreligious Dialogue and the Foro Guatemala to discuss societal and political topics. Some evangelical Protestant churches participated in this interfaith effort as well.

In January the Catholic Church hosted the “Week of Christian Unity.” The annual assembly hosted representatives from various Christian denominations.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials, including the ambassador, met on various occasions with leaders of major religious groups, as well as faith-based NGOs. The U.S. government continued to monitor all aspects of religious freedom, including those involving the religious practices of indigenous cultures.