

MEXICO

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom; however, there were some restrictions at the local level. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, frequently in small rural communities in the south.

U.S. embassy representatives met regularly with interlocutors from the federal and state governments and a variety of religious groups to discuss religious freedom and human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

In the 2010 census, approximately 83 percent of the population identified themselves as Roman Catholic. Approximately 8 percent stated affiliation with a Protestant or evangelical church, 2 percent identified themselves as members of other Bible-based religions, and one half of 1 percent as Jewish. More than 5 percent of the population reported not practicing any religion.

Official statistics sometimes differ from membership figures of religious groups. For example, 314,932 identified themselves as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) in the 2010 census; however, Mormons stated a membership of approximately 1.2 million. There are large Protestant communities in the southern states of Chiapas and Tabasco. In Chiapas, Protestant evangelicals stated that nearly half of the state's 2.4 million inhabitants are evangelicals, but less than 5 percent of the 2010 census respondents in Chiapas self-reported as evangelical.

The Jewish community numbers approximately 60,000, some 42,000 of whom live in Mexico City; there are also congregations in Guadalajara, Monterrey, Tijuana, Cancun, and San Miguel. Nearly half of the country's approximately 4,000 Muslims are concentrated in Mexico City and state. Some indigenous persons in

the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Yucatan practice a syncretic religion that mixes Catholic and pre-Hispanic Mayan beliefs.

In some communities, particularly in the south, there is a correlation between politics and religious affiliation. A small number of local leaders reportedly manipulated religious tensions in their communities for their own political or economic benefit, particularly in Chiapas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The government is secular. The constitution states that all persons are free to profess their chosen religious belief and to engage in ceremonies and acts of worship. Congress may not enact laws that establish or prohibit any religion. The constitution also provides for the separation of church and state. The Religious Associations and Public Worship Law defines the administrative remedies that protect the right to religious freedom. The constitution prohibits any form of discrimination, including on the basis of religion.

The federal government coordinates religious affairs through the Secretariat of Government. The General Directorate for Religious Associations (DGAR) promotes religious tolerance through public information campaigns and conflict mediation and investigates cases of religious intolerance. The DGAR has translated the Religious Associations and Public Worship Law into four indigenous languages. If parties present a dispute based on allegations of religious intolerance to the DGAR, it attempts to mediate 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 elect to seek judicial redress. Most states have specific offices dedicated to religious affairs; Chiapas, Guerrero, and Nuevo Leon have undersecretaries for religious affairs.

The government requires religious groups to apply for a permit to construct new buildings or convert existing buildings into houses of worship. Any religious building constructed since 1992 is the property of the religious association 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 law permits religious groups to operate informally without registering with the government; however, for a religious group to obtain legal status, it must register with the DGAR as a religious association. To register, a group must articulate its fundamental doctrines and religious beliefs, not be organized primarily for profit, and not promote acts that are physically harmful or dangerous to its members. 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.

Religious associations must notify the government of their intention to hold a religious meeting outside of a licensed place of worship. Thousands of notifications are typically submitted every year, and the government routinely approves such requests. Religious associations may not hold any sort of political meeting.

Religious groups may not own or administer broadcast radio or television stations. Government permission is required for commercial broadcast radio or television to transmit religious programming.

The constitution states that public education must be secular, but religious groups are free to maintain private schools. Primary level homeschooling for religious reasons is not explicitly prohibited or supported by the law; however, to enter a secondary school, one must have attended an accredited primary school. Homeschooling is allowed at the secondary level after schooling at an accredited primary school has been completed.

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

The government observes Christmas Day as a national holiday; however, most employers also grant Holy Thursday, Good Friday, All Souls' Day, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and Christmas Eve to employees as paid holidays.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Most incidents of discrimination occurred at the state and local levels. Some local community leaders and authorities, particularly in the south, allegedly used

religious affiliation as a pretext for conflicts related to political, ethnic, or land disputes, and some individuals in indigenous communities alleged denial of government benefits due to religious affiliation.

Poor enforcement mechanisms allowed local authorities--often leaders in semi-autonomous indigenous communities--in several states to discriminate against persons based on their religious beliefs. In July in the municipality of Cochoapa el Grande, Guerrero, authorities and local inhabitants obstructed the burial of an individual in the community's cemetery due to his evangelical beliefs. Federal and local government officials often failed to punish those responsible for acts of religious intolerance. While the DGAR worked closely with state and local officials on criminal investigations, they tended to be lengthy, similar to most criminal investigations in the country. Municipal and state officials generally were responsive in mediating disputes among religious groups; however, when a solution was not found, officials were usually not aggressive in pursuing legal remedies against offending local leaders. Investigations and prosecutions related to crimes rooted in religious intolerance were not common.

The registration process for religious groups does not normally present an obstacle. In 2011 the DGAR registered 132 associations, bringing the total to 7,686, most of which were evangelical Protestant.

In practice permission to transmit religious programming on commercial television and radio stations has been difficult to obtain for some non-Catholic religious groups. According to the Mexican nongovernmental organization (NGO) *Asociacion a Favor de la Libertad Religiosa* (Association for Religious Freedom), this has resulted in the proliferation of over 400 pirate radio stations throughout the country, at least 100 of which broadcast evangelical Protestant programs. The same NGO reports that, despite having submitted the required documentation, licenses have not been forthcoming, rendering these stations vulnerable to closure and arrests.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, frequently in small rural communities in the south. While religious differences were cited as the ostensible cause of such incidents, the disputes often were reported to have involved other factors, including ethnic differences, land disputes, and struggles over local political and economic power. Members of Buddhist, Jewish, and Mormon communities asserted they had

experienced little discrimination and few barriers to the practice of their religion, but several evangelical groups alleged that abuses and discrimination were frequent. The Catholic Church reported several instances of vandalism and attacks, including the destruction of an icon in the national cathedral during Easter mass and hacking of the website of the Mexican Bishops Conference.

In the central and southern regions, evangelical groups were reportedly viewed by some communities as unwelcome outside influences and economic and political threats. Community leaders reportedly sometimes acquiesced to or ordered the harassment or expulsion of individuals belonging chiefly to Protestant evangelical groups. The Oaxaca state government's director of religious affairs noted in November that 21 families in that state reported they had been expelled from their communities for their religious beliefs.

Members of indigenous communities did not normally pay taxes and instead were expected to pay fees to community leaders, who arranged directly with the state for the provision of services. Because the traditional practice of collecting donations for community works and projects often included contributing to public events associated with the observance of Catholic holy days, some evangelicals in indigenous communities reported they refused to pay and were ostracized from their communities. There were instances of village leaders imposing sanctions on evangelicals for resisting participation in community festivals or refusing to work on Sundays. Evangelicals complained specifically of water cut-offs, expulsion from their villages, loss of community rights and personal possessions, beatings, death threats, and the burning of their churches and homes.

The DGAR stated it received 21 new reports of religious intolerance in the country during the year and that these conflicts were being resolved with state and municipal authorities. With the goal of promoting social harmony, government officials, the president of the National Human Rights Commission, and interfaith groups continued discussions about incidents of intolerance. The Mexico City interfaith council included representatives from a broad spectrum of religious groups. There were also interfaith councils in Chiapas, Nuevo Leon, and Yucatan.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials for religious and indigenous affairs and human rights at the federal and state levels, raising cases of alleged abuses of evangelical Christians and discussing other religious freedom concerns, including pending constitutional reforms on religious freedom. Embassy

officers also met with members of religious groups and religiously-affiliated NGOs.