

PARAGUAY

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. The government established a permanent interfaith forum to provide a space for dialogue among different religious groups and philosophies.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, primarily psychological pressure by missionary groups to convert indigenous populations in an isolated region of the country. Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. ambassador and embassy officials met frequently with representatives of various religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2002 national census, 90 percent of the population was Roman Catholic and 6 percent was evangelical Protestant. Other religious groups include Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Muslims, Buddhists, the Unification Church, the Baha'i Faith, Mennonites, and tribal religions of indigenous groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Article 24 of the constitution protects religious freedom and there are no legal restrictions on religious expression or speech. Article 46 of the constitution nominally prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion. The constitution and other laws protect the right of individuals to choose, change, and freely practice their religion, provide legal protections covering discrimination and persecution, and offer remedies for the violation of religious freedom.

The constitution recognizes the historical role of the Catholic Church. Catholic clergy occasionally spoke during official government events. The government permits political parties to form based on a particular faith. The constitution requires the president, vice president, and members of congress to be laypersons.

During her October visit, the UN deputy high commissioner for human rights expressed concern about the lack of a law implementing the constitutional prohibition of discrimination based on religion and urged passage by the country's congress of pending legislation that would put such protection in place.

The government requires all churches and other religious organizations to register with the Vice Ministry of Worship in the Ministry of Education and Culture. There is no fee. Registration includes completing required paperwork, obtaining certification as a nonprofit organization, passing financial and criminal background checks, and recertifying annually.

The government does not place restrictions on foreign missionaries.

The government permits but does not require religious instruction in public schools. The government permits parents to homeschool or send their children to the school of their choice without sanction or restriction.

The constitution and law provide for conscientious objection to military service based on religious beliefs. The armed forces have an extensive Catholic chaplain program supported by the government. In 2009 a Protestant chaplain was appointed for the first time, and in December President Fernando Lugo signed a decree formally establishing the National Evangelical Chaplain Program within the armed forces, granting it the same support as the Catholic Church's chaplain program.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Maundy (Holy) Thursday, Good Friday, Virgin of Caacupe Day, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

A March report by the UN special rapporteur on religious freedom noted that non-Catholic religious groups were required to register and reregister on an annual basis with the Vice Ministry of Worship of the Ministry of Education and Culture,

while the Catholic Church was not subject to this requirement. Many religious groups, such as small evangelical churches, remain unregistered. According to the law, religious groups that are not registered do not receive official recognition of degrees awarded by educational institutions they administer.

The same report noted complaints by Protestant groups that a recently established Protestant university did not receive state subsidies while a Catholic university was supported financially by the government.

The government established a permanent interfaith forum to provide a space for dialogue among different religions and philosophies.

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, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

A March report issued by UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Heiner Bielefeldt observed that Mennonite employers in remote areas of the Chaco region favored indigenous laborers who had converted over those who had not. Bielefeldt also noted reports of psychological pressure by Protestant missionary groups in attempts to convert indigenous populations professing their ancestral religions. Bielefeldt stated that the lack of government institutions and regulatory presence in the region had led to gaps in the protection of religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador and embassy officials met frequently with representatives of various religious groups to discuss and support interfaith dialogue and religious freedom.