

# COLOMBIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. In some areas of the country, illegal armed groups, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), abused religious freedom by killing, kidnapping, and threatening the leaders and members of religious groups, and targeting them for extortion. The National Liberation Army (ELN) continued to threaten members of religious groups. Terrorist groups generally targeted the leaders and members of religious groups for political rather than religious reasons. Organized crime groups also targeted the leaders and members of religious groups.

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

U.S. embassy representatives met with representatives of a wide range of religious groups and the government, including Protestants, Catholics, and Mennonites, as well as with the prosecutor general's office and the Ministries of Foreign Relations (MRE) and Interior (MOI).

## Section I. Religious Demography

The population is 47 million, according to a 2011 World Bank estimate. The government does not keep statistics on religious affiliation, and estimates from religious leaders varied. The Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference estimates that 90 percent of the population is Catholic, while the Colombian Evangelical Council (CEDECOL) states that approximately 15 percent of the population is Protestant. According to a 2007 press report, 80 percent of the population is Catholic, 14 percent is non-Catholic Christian, 2 percent is agnostic, and the remaining 4 percent belongs to other religious groups, including Islam and Judaism. Other observers estimate that the non-Catholic population consists of five million members of Protestant, including evangelical, groups; 261,000 Seventh-day Adventists; 150,000 members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons); 10,000 Muslims, and 5,000 Jews. There is also a small population of adherents to animism and various syncretic beliefs.

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Some religious groups are concentrated in certain geographical regions. Most of those who blend Catholicism with elements of African animism are Afro-Colombians and reside on the Pacific coast. Most Jews reside in major cities, most Muslims on the Caribbean coast, and most adherents of indigenous animistic religions in remote rural areas. A small Taoist commune is located in a mountainous region of Santander Department.

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

#### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution specifically prohibits religious discrimination.

The constitution states there is no official church or religion, but adds that the state “is not atheist or agnostic, nor indifferent to Colombians’ religious sentiment.” A 1973 concordat between the Vatican and the government remains in effect, although some of its articles are unenforceable because of constitutional provisions on freedom of religion. A 1994 Constitutional Court decision declares unconstitutional any official government reference to a religious characterization of the country.

Although the 1991 constitution mandates separation of church and state, the Catholic Church retains a privileged status. Non-Catholic religious groups must accede to a 1997 public law agreement with the state to perform state-recognized marriages and provide chaplaincy services to military personnel, public hospital patients, and prisoners. When deciding whether to grant accession to the 1997 agreement, the government considers a religious group’s total membership, its degree of acceptance within society, and other factors such as the organization’s statutes and its required behavioral norms.

The MOI is responsible for legally recognizing churches, religious denominations, religious federations and confederations, and associations of religious ministers, and keeps a public registry of religious entities. Entities legally recognized by the MOI can then confer legal recognition, called “extended public recognition,” to affiliated groups sharing the same beliefs. Although the application process is often lengthy, the MOI routinely grants legal recognition; the only requirements are submission of a formal request and basic organizational information. Any foreign religious group wishing to establish a presence must document its home

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country official recognition. The MOI may reject requests that do not comply fully with established requirements, or that violate constitutional rights.

The state recognizes as legally binding only those religious marriages celebrated by the Catholic Church, the 13 religious groups that are signatories to the 1997 public law agreement, as well as religious groups with an associate status. Members of religious groups that are neither signatories to the agreement nor associates must marry in a civil ceremony for the state to recognize the marriage.

A chapter on discrimination in the penal code includes religious discrimination as a punishable offense, carrying penalties of one to three years in prison or a fine of 5.3 million to 8 million pesos (\$2,700-\$4,100).

The MRE issues visas to foreign missionaries and religious group administrators who have received special public recognition. Foreign missionaries must possess a special visa, valid for up to two years. Applicants must have either a certificate from the MOI confirming their religious group is registered with the ministry or a certificate issued by the Catholic archdiocese. Alternatively, they may produce a certificate issued by a recognized religious group confirming the applicant's membership and mission in the country. They also require a letter issued by a legal representative of the religious group stating the organization accepts full financial responsibility for the expenses of the applicant and family, including return to their country of origin or last country of residence. In both cases, applicants must explain the purpose of the proposed sojourn and provide proof of economic means. The government generally permits missionaries to proselytize among the indigenous population, provided the indigenous community welcomes proselytism and visitors do not induce members of indigenous communities to adopt changes that endanger their survival on traditional lands. A Supreme Court ruling stipulates that no group may force religious conversion on members of indigenous communities.

The constitution recognizes the right of parents to choose the type of education that their children receive, including religious instruction. It also states that no student shall be forced to receive religious education in public schools. Religious groups that have not acceded to the public law agreement may establish their own schools, provided they comply with Ministry of Education requirements. The Jewish community operated its own schools. A Constitutional Court ruling obligates schools to implement alternative accommodations for students based on their religion, following the petition of a Seventh-day Adventist university student to miss class on Saturday.

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The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Saint Joseph Day, Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, the Ascension, Corpus Christi, Sacred Heart Day, Saints Peter and Paul Day, the Feast of the Assumption, All Saints' Day, the Immaculate Conception, and Christmas.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Some observers interpreted the constitutional assertion that the state “is not atheist or agnostic, nor indifferent to Colombians’ religious sentiment” to mean that the state unofficially sanctioned a privileged position for Catholicism, which was the official religion until adoption of the 1991 Constitution.

During the year the MOI received 1,048 applications for legal recognition of religious entities and approved 644. The remaining 404 did not meet constitutionally established requirements, such as providing administratively required documentation. A number of entities abandoned or withdrew their applications.

While all legally recognized churches, seminaries, monasteries, and convents were exempt from national and local taxes and customs duties, CEDECOL asserted that in practice municipal governments required some non-Catholic religious groups to pay property and other local taxes on places of worship and schools. The Bogota city government reportedly attempted to tax the real estate on which a Protestant church was located. At year’s end the issue was unresolved, according to the United Church of Bogota.

Only Christian religious groups are signatories to the 1997 public law agreement enabling religious groups to provide chaplaincy services and perform marriages. Some prominent non-Christian religious groups, such as the Jewish community, chose not to accede to the 1997 public law, declaring that the agreement was designed for Protestant groups.

Many signatory churches reported that some local authorities failed to comply with the accord, and some complained that municipal authorities refused to recognize marriages the groups performed.

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### Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces or Terrorist Organizations

Guerrilla groups and other illegal armed groups, including organized crime groups, killed, kidnapped, and threatened the leaders and members of religious groups, and targeted them for extortion. In general crimes against religious group leaders were motivated not by religious beliefs but by a desire to disrupt human rights work, such as advocacy on behalf of the displaced population or other vulnerable groups, or helping vulnerable groups with land claims.

The Human Rights Unit of the Prosecutor General's Office continued to investigate previous years' murders of clergy reportedly targeted as outspoken critics of terrorist organizations and illegal armed groups. The Roman Catholic Church reported unknown persons murdered four Catholic priests and threatened another priest. In September an unknown assailant who escaped on a motorcycle killed a Christian pastor in Bogota. At year's end, the Prosecutor General's Office was reportedly investigating these murders.

The Presidential Program for Human Rights reported that leftist guerrillas, particularly the FARC, were responsible for nearly all terrorist-group murders of priests in previous years. Catholic and Protestant leaders noted that isolation and fear of retribution in rural communities generally led to underreporting of clergy murders. Religious leaders reportedly chose not to seek government protection because of pacifist beliefs and fear of retribution by terrorist groups.

The nongovernmental organization (NGO) Justapaz and CEDECOL continued to report threats and forced displacement of clergy and church members from the Association of Caribbean Evangelical Churches in Cordoba. These churches worked closely with communities seeking land restitution.

Other illegal armed groups, including the Rastrojos and Urabenos, also targeted human rights organizations and religious workers.

Most religious groups reported that religious leaders refrained from publicly discussing the conflict because of threats from guerrillas and other illegal armed groups. These groups, especially the FARC, threatened or attacked religious leaders for opposing the forced recruitment of minors, promoting human rights, assisting internally displaced persons, and discouraging coca cultivation. The Catholic Bishops' Conference also reported that guerrillas and other illegal armed groups issued death threats against rural priests who denounced them. In response to such threats, some religious leaders relocated to other communities.

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Other illegal armed groups that included former paramilitary members harassed some indigenous adherents of animist or syncretic religions; however, political or economic differences or questions of land ownership, rather than religious concerns, generally appeared to have motivated such harassment.

### **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.

A number of faith-based and interfaith NGOs promoted human rights, social and economic development, and a negotiated settlement to the armed conflict. The most influential of these organizations were either affiliated with the Catholic Church or founded by church officials. In September, Pope Benedict XVI publicly supported the peace process saying, “I hope those who take part in this initiative will be guided by the will of forgiveness and reconciliation, while sincerely searching for the common good.” The Catholic Church was the only institutional presence in many rural areas, and its Social Pastoral Agency conducted social work.

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

U.S. embassy representatives, including the ambassador, maintained regular communication with representatives of the Catholic Church and other religious groups. Embassy staff routinely met with U.S. and local leaders of the Presbyterian, Mennonite, and other churches to discuss human rights issues affecting their communities. Embassy officers reached out to these groups on official trips within the country. Embassy representatives also engaged officials in the Prosecutor General’s Office, and the Ministries of Interior and Foreign Affairs on religious freedom issues.