

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

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

U.S. embassy officials met frequently with representatives of various religious groups to encourage interfaith cooperation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The General Directorate of Statistics, Surveys, and Census estimates the population to be 6.7 million. According to the 2002 national census, 90 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 6 percent is evangelical Protestant. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Muslims, Buddhists, Bahais, Mennonites, members of the Unification Church, and adherents of indigenous tribal religions.

Mennonites comprise a majority of the population in remote areas of the Central Chaco and Eastern Paraguay.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. There are no restrictions on religious expression or speech. The constitution prohibits discrimination of any kind and Article 63 specifically guarantees the religious freedom of indigenous communities. The constitution and other laws protect the right of individuals to choose, change, and freely practice their religion. The

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constitution provides protection against discrimination and persecution and offers remedies for violating religious freedom.

The constitution recognizes the historic role of the Catholic Church. The government permits political parties to form based on a specific faith, but requires that the president, vice president, and members of congress be laypersons.

The government requires all churches and other religious groups to register with the Vice Ministry of Worship in the Ministry of Education and Culture. Registration requires certification as a nonprofit organization, financial and criminal background checks, and annual recertification.

By law, the government officially recognizes a degree granted by a religiously-affiliated educational institution only if the religious group operating the institution is registered with the government. Non-Catholic religious groups are required to register annually with the Ministry of Education and Culture's Vice Ministry of Worship. The Catholic Church is not subject to this requirement.

The government permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools, and allows parents either to educate their children at home, or to send their children to the school of their choice without sanction or restriction.

The constitution and laws provide for conscientious objection to military service based on religious beliefs.

The government supports an extensive Catholic chaplaincy program in the armed forces. A National Evangelical Chaplain Program, established in 2011, receives the same government support as the Catholic program.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Maundy (Holy) Thursday, Good Friday, Virgin of Caacupe Day (December 8), and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Many non-Catholic religious groups, such as small evangelical churches, remained unregistered at year's end. A nongovernmental organization (NGO) stated in its

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annual report that the government subsidized a significant number of religious private schools and NGOs.

At year's end, congress had not yet passed pending legislation to implement the constitutional prohibition of discrimination based on religion.

The government continued to support an interfaith forum to provide a space for dialogue among different religions and philosophies. Catholic clergy occasionally spoke during official government events.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Mennonite-owned entities were often the predominant source of employment in remote areas of the Chaco region. According to a 2011 UN report, Mennonite employers favored indigenous laborers who had converted over those who had not. The UN report also noted psychological pressure by Protestant missionary groups to convert members of the indigenous population to Christianity, and asserted that the lack of government institutions and regulatory presence in the region resulted in gaps in the protection of religious freedom. This situation persisted in 2012 and remained of concern.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officials met frequently with representatives of various religious groups to discuss and support interfaith dialogue and religious freedom. The ambassador accompanied a visiting U.S. Roman Catholic cardinal for discussions with university and business groups. The ambassador also visited the central Chaco area and met with political and business leaders of the Mennonite community, with whom he discussed the religious freedom of indigenous communities.