

COSTA RICA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The government generally applied and enforced laws in a nondiscriminatory fashion, but some non-Catholic religious leaders expressed concerns about the effects of government policies. Public schools instituted a supreme court ruling that for the first time allowed non-Catholic, in addition to Catholic, education courses.

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

U.S. embassy officials regularly met with government officials and religious leaders and supported dialogue among religious groups through invitations to religious leaders to participate in embassy events.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.7 million (July 2013 estimate). A 2012 CID-Gallup survey estimated that 63 percent of the population identify as Roman Catholics, 23 percent as Protestants, 3 percent as belonging to other religious groups, and 10 percent as having no religious affiliation.

The majority of Protestants are Pentecostal, with smaller numbers of Baptists, Lutherans, and others. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) estimates its membership at 35,000. The Lutheran Church estimates it has 5,500 members. The Jewish Zionist Center estimates that there are 3,000 Jews. Approximately 1,000 Quakers live in the cloud forest reserve of Monteverde, Puntarenas, and an additional 1,000 individuals attend Quaker meetings as nonmembers throughout the country. Although they represent less than 1 percent of the population, Jehovah's Witnesses have a strong presence on the Caribbean coast. Seventh-day Adventists operate a university that attracts students from throughout the Caribbean Basin. The Unification Church has its headquarters for Latin America in San Jose. Other religious groups include followers of Islam, Taoism, Krishna Consciousness, Scientology, Tenrikyo, and the Bahai Faith. Indigenous peoples are more likely than non-indigenous peoples to practice animism.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The constitution recognizes the right to practice the religion of one's choice. By law, a person claiming a violation of religious freedom may file suit with the constitutional chamber of the Supreme Court, and may also file a motion before the constitutional chamber to have a statute or regulation declared unconstitutional. Additionally, a person claiming a violation of religious freedom may appeal to the administrative court to sue the government for alleged discriminatory acts. Legal protections cover discrimination by private persons and entities.

The constitution establishes Roman Catholicism as the state religion and requires that the state contribute to its maintenance. The constitution also prohibits the state from impeding the free exercise of other religions that do not impugn "universal morality or proper behavior." Unlike other religious groups, the Catholic Church is not registered as an association and receives special legal recognition. Its assets and holdings are governed consistent with canon law.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religion is responsible for managing the government's relationship with the Catholic Church and other religious groups. The ministry's budget includes funding for maintenance and repairs of some Catholic churches. All religious groups receive exemptions from income and real estate taxes for buildings devoted to services and religious activities.

The law allows the government to provide land to the Catholic Church. Government-to-church land transfers are typically granted through periodic legislation. The government earmarks funding for construction or improvement projects of Catholic churches around the country.

Only Catholic priests and public notaries can perform state-recognized marriages. Wedding ceremonies performed by other religious groups must be legalized through a civil union. Couples may also choose to have a civil ceremony only.

The constitution forbids Catholic clergy from serving as president, vice president, cabinet members, or supreme court justices. The Supreme Elections Tribunal has ruled that this prohibition does not apply to non-Catholic clergy.

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The government does not require religious groups to register, nor does it inhibit the establishment of religious groups through taxation or special licensing requirements. According to the Law of Associations, a group with a minimum of 10 persons may incorporate as an association with juridical status by registering with the public registry of the Ministry of Justice. Like other groups, religious groups must register to engage in any type of fundraising activity.

An executive order provides the legal framework for religious organizations to establish places of worship. Religious organizations must submit applications to the local municipality to establish a place of worship and comply with the safety and noise regulations established by law. A revision of the executive order, signed in 2009, modifies the allowable distance between places of worship and their surroundings, but provides a two-year extension to achieve compliance with Ministry of Health regulations.

Immigration law requires foreign religious workers to belong to a religious group accredited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religion, and stipulates that religious workers may receive permission to stay at least 90 days but not more than two years, and the permissions are renewable. Immigration regulations require religious workers to apply for temporary residency before arrival.

The Ministry of Public Education provides assistance to private schools, both Catholic and non-Catholic, including either directly placing teachers or providing their salaries, as well as other monetary support.

All public schools provide religious instruction. The government now allows non-Catholic religion courses in public schools to conform with a 2010 supreme court ruling annulling a regulation that limited public school religious instruction to Catholic courses. A student may obtain an exemption with parental permission, but the school director, parents, and teacher must agree on an alternative course of instruction. The Catholic Church no longer participates with school authorities in selecting and dismissing public school religion teachers. Non-Catholic teachers are able to serve in these positions. Private schools are not required to offer religious instruction. Parents do not have the option to homeschool their children.

Government Practices

The government generally applied and enforced laws in a nondiscriminatory fashion, but some religious leaders expressed concerns about the effects of government policies.

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Some non-Catholic leaders stated that the law did not sufficiently address the specific concerns of non-Catholic religious groups. They expressed a preference for a separate registration for non-Catholic religious groups that would specifically cover church construction and operation; permits to organize events; and pastoral access to hospitals and jails. In the case of the Catholic Church, the government continued to address such concerns through the special legal recognition afforded the church under canon law.

An individual on August 5 filed a complaint to the Supreme Court that protested religious statements read by the leaders of the three branches of government (the president, legislative president, and supreme court chief justice) during an official ceremony.

The Supreme Elections Tribunal on February 4 ordered the Costa Rican Renovation political party to remove a Christian symbol from its party logo, ruling that it violated the constitutional provision that “neither clergymen nor laymen may engage in any form of political propaganda, invoking religious motives or making use of religious beliefs.”

The Supreme Court on January 30 denied a citizen’s protest against a municipal government that authorized the public display of religious symbols in government buildings, stating that the local government did not violate freedom of thought, conscience, or religion.

An opposition legislator during a legislative session in September made anti-Semitic remarks against Jewish Vice President Luis Liberman that legislators from all political parties, including his own, condemned; however, neither the government nor his party took additional action to censure the legislator.

Some evangelical leaders stated that it was unfair for the government to provide land and tax exemptions exclusively to the Catholic Church. The government occasionally provided support to other religious groups, such as funding for an Adventist church construction project in Limon.

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.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives addressed relations of religious groups with government institutions in meetings with the Director of Religion at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with legislators. Embassy representatives also met regularly with religious leaders and supported dialogue among religious groups through invitations to religious leaders to participate in embassy events.