

GUATEMALA 2013 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. Access to Mayan historical sites for Mayan spiritual groups continued to be contentious.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy monitored religious freedom, and embassy officers met regularly with leaders of religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population is 14.4 million (July 2013 estimate). The government does not collect official statistics on religious affiliation. A 2010 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project found that approximately 95 percent of the population is Christian, of whom 59 percent are Catholic and 36 percent are Protestant. The survey also found that approximately 4 percent of the population professes no religious affiliation and the remaining 1 percent includes adherents of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, or Mayan religions.

The largest Protestant group is the Full Gospel Church, followed by the Assemblies of God, the Central American Church, and the Prince of Peace Church. There are numerous independent Protestant evangelical groups. Other Christian groups include Baptists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Episcopalians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Russian Orthodox, and Seventh-day Adventists.

Catholics and Protestants are present throughout the country, and their adherents are found among all major ethnic groups. According to leaders of Mayan spiritual organizations as well as Catholic and Protestant missionaries, many indigenous Catholics and some indigenous Protestants also practice some form of indigenous spiritual rituals.

GUATEMALA

Approximately 2,000 Jews and a small Muslim population reside primarily in Guatemala City.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

There is no state religion; however, the constitution recognizes explicitly the distinct legal personality of the Catholic Church.

The constitution also protects the rights of indigenous groups to practice their traditions and desired forms of cultural expression, which often include religious rites. The criminal code penalizes violation of the freedom of religious celebration and sentiment and the desecration of burial sites or human remains. These laws, however, are seldom, if ever, enforced.

According to the constitution, no member of the clergy of any religion may serve as president.

The government does not require religious groups to register for the purpose of worship. Nevertheless, the government requires religious groups other than the Catholic Church to register as legal entities to conduct business, such as renting or purchasing premises and entering into contracts, and to receive tax-exempt status.

Any non-Catholic religious group must file a copy of its bylaws and a list of its initial membership with the Ministry of Government to receive formal recognition. The group must have at least 25 members, and the bylaws must reflect an intention to pursue religious objectives. The ministry may reject applications only if the group does not appear to be devoted to a religious objective, appears intent on undertaking illegal activities, or engages in activities that appear likely to threaten public order.

Foreign missionaries must obtain tourist visas, which are issued for renewable periods of three months. After renewing their tourist visas once, foreign missionaries may apply for temporary residence.

The constitution permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools; however, in general, public schools have no religious component to the

GUATEMALA

curriculum. There is no national framework for determining the nature or content of religious instruction. When provided, content is usually determined at the local level. The Ministry of Education consults with religious groups on integrating general values, such as citizenship, but not specific religious teachings, into school curricula.

Government Practices

While registered religious entities are legally exempt from taxes, Protestant leaders stated that local officials sometimes required their churches to pay property taxes.

Although the law permits Mayan spiritual groups to conduct religious ceremonies at Mayan historical sites on government-owned property, some Mayan leaders stated that the government limited their access to some religious sites on the grounds that many Mayan archeological sites are now national parks or protected areas. Such limitations included requiring all visitors, including Mayans, to pay admission fees to access the religious sites. Mayan spiritual groups noted that at certain sites authorities also required Mayans to apply in advance for permission to hold religious ceremonies. Mayan leaders stated they should have unrestricted access to all sacred sites (an estimated 2,000 locations on both public and private land), and the right to manage and protect them.

On August 22, Prosperous Guatemala, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), sponsored the country's first national prayer breakfast, which was designed to promote religious tolerance by bringing together individuals from different religious groups. President Otto Perez Molina and other high-ranking government officials attended the event.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

On October 14, the Constitutional Court held a special hearing on a May 2012 incident involving a Catholic priest in Santiago Atitlan who allegedly attempted to forbid 11 indigenous religious brotherhoods from performing their traditional Mayan ceremonies in the local Catholic Church. The local priest said that such traditional ceremonies, which blend elements of indigenous Mayan religions with Catholicism and had been generally tolerated by the local Catholic Church, were "debauchery." In November 2012, the priest imposed a strict ban prohibiting all

GUATEMALA

such Mayan syncretic ceremonies from taking place in the church. The brotherhoods subsequently filed a joint legal claim under the jurisdiction of the Constitutional Court seeking legal recourse to maintain their ability to conduct their ceremonies within the church. The case was still pending at the end of the year.

Private owners of land in natural locations that are also sacred Mayan sites, such as caves, lagoons, mountains, and forests, sometimes denied access to Mayan spiritual groups.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officials, including the Ambassador, met with leaders of major religious groups and with representatives of faith-based NGOs. The embassy continued to monitor all aspects of religious freedom, including those involving the religious practices of indigenous cultures.