

MEXICO 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. In practice, the government generally respected religious freedom; however, some members of indigenous communities reported local authorities denied them government benefits as a result of their religious affiliation, and some evangelical religious groups reported discrimination from local authorities.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. These reports most frequently occurred in small rural communities in the south.

U.S. embassy and consulate representatives met regularly with officials from the federal and state governments and with members of a variety of religious groups to discuss religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 116.2 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2010 government census, approximately 83 percent identified itself as Roman Catholic and 5 percent as evangelical Protestant. Religious groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include other Protestants, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jews. Over 2 percent of the population reported practicing a religion not otherwise specified, and nearly 5 percent reported not practicing any religion.

Official statistics differ from membership figures religious groups provide. Approximately 315,000 individuals identified themselves as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) in the 2010 census; however, Mormon Church in Mexico officials state their membership is approximately 1.3 million. There are large Protestant communities in the southern states of Chiapas and Tabasco. In Chiapas Protestant evangelical leaders state nearly half of the state's 2.4 million inhabitants are members of evangelical groups, but less than 5 percent of 2010 census respondents in Chiapas self-identified as evangelical.

According to the 2010 census, the Jewish community numbers approximately 67,500, some 42,000 of whom live in Mexico City and the state of Mexico; there

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are also small numbers of Jews in Morelos, Oaxaca, Puebla, and Veracruz. Nearly half of the country's approximately 4,000 Muslims are concentrated in Mexico City and the state of Mexico. Roughly half of the country's approximately 100,000 Mennonites are concentrated in the state of Chihuahua. Some indigenous persons in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Yucatan adhere to a syncretic religion combining Catholic and pre-Hispanic Mayan beliefs.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

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

The government is secular. The constitution states all persons are free to profess their chosen religious belief and to engage in ceremonies and acts of worship. Congress may not enact laws that establish or prohibit any religion. The constitution also provides for the separation of church and state. The constitution prohibits any form of discrimination, including on the basis of religion. A constitutional amendment that took effect in July specifically prohibits the use of acts of worship for political purposes. The amendment allows for religious services to take place "in public as well as private" places, and added "freedom of ethical convictions" to the constitution, intended to guarantee the freedom to have no religious faith. The law defines administrative remedies protecting the right to religious freedom.

The federal government coordinates religious affairs through the Secretariat of Government. The General Directorate for Religious Associations (DGAR) promotes religious tolerance through public information campaigns, conducts conflict mediation, and investigates cases of religious intolerance. If parties present a dispute based on allegations of religious intolerance to the DGAR, it attempts to mediate a solution. If mediation fails, the parties may submit the issue to the DGAR for binding arbitration. If the parties do not agree to this procedure, one or the other may elect to seek judicial redress.

The National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) promotes religious tolerance through outreach efforts and conducts a survey on discrimination, including discrimination based on religion. CONAPRED also receives complaints of discrimination based on religious beliefs and mediates conflicts. All states have administrative offices with responsibility over religious affairs and 22 federal

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entities have specialized offices dedicated to religious affairs. Chiapas, Guerrero, Yucatan, and Oaxaca states have undersecretaries for religious affairs.

The government requires religious groups to apply for a permit to construct new buildings or convert existing buildings into houses of worship. Any religious building constructed since 1992 is the property of the religious group that built it. All religious buildings erected before 1992 are classified as part of the national patrimony, owned by the state, and exempt from taxes.

The law permits religious groups to operate informally without registering with the government; however, religious groups must be registered to negotiate contracts and purchase or rent land, apply for official building permits, receive tax exemptions, and hold religious meetings outside their customary places of worship. To obtain legal status, a religious group must register with the DGAR as a religious association, and to register, a group must articulate its fundamental doctrines and religious beliefs, not be organized primarily for profit, and not promote acts that are physically harmful or dangerous to its members.

Religious associations must notify the government of their intention to hold a religious meeting outside of a licensed place of worship. Religious associations may not hold political meetings of any kind.

Religious groups may not own or administer broadcast radio or television stations. Government permission is required for commercial broadcast radio or television to transmit religious programming.

The constitution states public education must be secular, but religious groups are permitted to operate private schools. The law takes no position on primary-level homeschooling for religious reasons, but to enter a secondary school, one must have attended an accredited primary school. Homeschooling is allowed at the secondary level after completion of schooling at an accredited primary school.

The constitution bars members of the clergy from holding public office, advocating partisan political views, supporting political candidates, or publically opposing the laws or institutions of the state.

Government Practices

Some members of indigenous communities reported the local authorities denied them government benefits due to their religious affiliation. Because ethnicity and

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religion are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

Some members of evangelical communities stated poor enforcement mechanisms allowed local authorities in several states, often leaders of semi-autonomous indigenous communities, to discriminate against community members based on their religious beliefs. Federal and local government officials reportedly failed to punish those responsible for acts of religious intolerance. While the DGAR worked closely with state and local officials on criminal investigations, progress tended to be slow. Municipal and state officials commonly mediated disputes among religious groups; however, officials rarely pursued legal remedies against offending local leaders. According to press reports, in Chiapas civil and religious organizations documented approximately 30 religious conflicts that qualified as “serious” and involved over a thousand people. There were few investigations and prosecutions related to crimes rooted in religious intolerance.

Some religious groups protested the constitutional amendment that added the phrase “freedom of ethical convictions.” The Mexican Civilian Laic Forum called the amendment a setback for secularism, saying the amendment gave the state and not the individual the authority to determine which beliefs were ethical and unethical.

The DGAR registered 187 new religious associations during the year, bringing the total to 7,976. Most were evangelical Protestant (42), followed by Roman Catholic (24), and Baptist Evangelical (11).

Some non-Catholic religious groups reported continued difficulty in obtaining permission to transmit religious programming on commercial television and radio. According to the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Association for Religious Freedom, over 100 unregulated radio stations broadcast evangelical Protestant programs throughout the country, the majority in Chiapas.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. These incidents mainly occurred in small rural communities in the south. Several evangelical groups stated religious abuses and discrimination were frequent. In addition, there was a report priests faced an increase during the year in extortion attempts, death threats, and intimidation.

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In the central and southern regions, some communities reportedly viewed evangelical groups as unwelcome outside influences and economic and political threats. Community leaders reportedly acquiesced to or ordered the harassment or expulsion of members of Protestant evangelical groups. In June there were reports a group of about 200 Catholic Indians in Los Llanos, Chiapas, took 33 evangelical Indians captive for several hours, beating them and threatening to burn them alive. According to the victims' relatives, the evangelicals were released after they promised not to file a complaint. At the time of the attack, the evangelical Indians were trying to return to the houses from which they had been forcibly expelled in 2010. At that time, the Catholic Indians forced them to leave for expressing views that ran counter to Catholic teachings.

DGAR stated it had received 12 reports of religious intolerance during the year, two were resolved, and the others were being addressed with state and municipal authorities.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy and consulate representatives met regularly with government officials responsible for religious and indigenous affairs at the federal and state levels, raising cases of alleged abuses of evangelical Christians and discussing other religious freedom concerns.

Embassy officers also met with members of religious groups and religiously-affiliated NGOs to assess the status of religious freedom and express support for religious tolerance. In February consulate officers in Ciudad Juarez gave three presentations promoting religious and ethnic diversity to high school and university student groups.