

PARAGUAY 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution, laws, and policies protect religious freedom and the government generally respected religious freedom. The government continued to support a permanent interfaith forum to provide for dialogue among different religious groups.

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

U.S. embassy officials met frequently with representatives of various religious groups to show support for interfaith respect and dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.6 million (July 2013 estimate). According to the 2002 national census, the most recent survey that includes information on religious affiliation, 90 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, and 6 percent is evangelical Protestant. Other groups that constitute 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 beliefs.

Mennonites are prominent in the remote areas of the Central Chaco and some regions of Eastern Paraguay.

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 and other laws protect the right of individuals to choose, change, and freely practice their religion. There are no restrictions on religious expression or speech. The constitution prohibits discrimination of any kind and specifically guarantees the religious freedom of indigenous communities. The constitution provides protection against discrimination and persecution and offers remedies for violating religious freedom.

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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 religious groups to register with the Vice Ministry of Worship (VMW) in the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC). To register religious groups must, among other requirements, demonstrate legal status as a nonprofit organization, submit to financial and criminal background checks, and agree to annual recertification. There are 465 religious groups currently registered with the VMW. There are no penalties or monetary sanctions if religious groups do not register with the VMW, but they cannot receive government tax-exemption benefits or educational subsidies if they do not register. In contrast with past practice, the MEC now checks compliance of the Catholic Church with the certification law.

Missionaries must also register with the MEC and, according to the MEC, an average of 15 missionaries register every month. Most registered missionaries are Mennonites or Mormons.

By law the government officially recognizes an educational degree granted by a religiously-affiliated educational institution only if the religious group operating the institution is registered with the MEC. The MEC also monitors and inspects the facilities of educational institutions run by religious organizations. Orphanages and shelters operated by religious groups are monitored by the National Secretariat of Children and Adolescents, the Ministry of Health, and can also be inspected by the National Commission against Torture.

Religious instruction in public schools is not allowed. The government, however, does pay some teachers' salaries in registered private religious schools.

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

The government supports chaplaincy programs for Catholics and other religious groups in the armed forces.

Government Practices

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The MEC continued to pay the salaries of hundreds of teachers in registered schools run by religious groups, most of which are Catholic. Several non-Catholic religious groups expressed concern that the government disproportionately supported Catholic schools and did not pay a sufficient number of teachers in registered, non-Catholic religious schools.

The government continued to support an interfaith forum comprised of 16 associations of various religious groups and aimed at facilitating dialogue. On August 8 and 9, the interfaith forum and the VMW held the country's first International Religious Freedom Congress with more than 800 participants.

Catholic clergy frequently spoke during official government events, including the presidential inauguration on August 15. The National Congress invited representatives of various religious groups to lead prayers at the beginning of some sessions.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Labor unions, religious leaders, and human rights organizations reported that Mennonite employers continued to favor indigenous laborers who had converted to the Mennonite faith over those who had not. Entities owned by Mennonite associations, cooperatives, or individuals were often the predominant source of employment in the remote areas of the Chaco region. The Ministry of Justice and Labor, the National Institute of Indigenous Affairs and the VMW did not have offices in the Chaco region, limiting the ability of indigenous laborers to file complaints of labor discrimination based on religious affiliation and the ability of the government to investigate.

Community leaders hosted conferences, religious forums, and workgroups, with a focus on the inclusion of all religious beliefs, in order to reduce societal discrimination.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials, in particular the Ambassador, continued to meet frequently with representatives of various religious groups to support interfaith understanding

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and religious freedom. Embassy representatives also met with the interfaith forum and representatives from the VMW.