

# **GUATEMALA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including freedom of worship and the free expression of all beliefs. The constitution recognizes the distinct legal personality of the Catholic Church. Non-Catholic religious groups are required to register with the Ministry of Government in order to enter into contracts or receive tax-exempt status. There was considerable discussion regarding a bill introduced in July in the national congress that would require Biblical education in all public schools. The bill had not progressed through the legislative process as of the end of the year. Mayan spiritual leaders reported the government limited their access to some Mayan religious sites.

Mayan spiritual leaders also reported that private land owners limited their access to some Mayan religious sites.

The U.S. embassy held meetings with government officials and leaders of religious groups to discuss issues of religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 14.9 million (July 2015 estimate). According to a survey conducted during the year by the survey firm ProDatos, approximately 45 percent of the population is Catholic and 42 percent Protestant. Approximately 11 percent of the population professes no religious affiliation. Groups that together constitute less than 3 percent of the population include Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and adherents of Mayan religions.

Non-Catholic Christians include the Full Gospel Church, the Assemblies of God, the Central American Church, the Prince of Peace Church, numerous independent Protestant evangelical groups, 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, with adherents 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.

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

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including the free expression of all beliefs and the right to practice a religion or belief, in public and private. The constitution recognizes the distinct legal personality of the Catholic Church and states that non-Catholic religious groups must register with the government to obtain legal status.

Although the constitution does not require religious groups to register for the purpose of worship, it stipulates that religious groups other than the Catholic Church must seek legal status to conduct activities such as renting or purchasing property and entering into contracts, and to receive tax-exempt status. The constitution provides for tax exemptions for properties of registered religious entities used for worship, religious education, and social assistance. To register, any non-Catholic religious group must file a copy of its bylaws and a list of its initial membership with the Ministry of Government. The group must have at least 25 members, and the bylaws must reflect an intention to pursue religious objectives. The ministry may reject applications 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.

The constitution protects the rights of indigenous groups to practice their traditions and desired forms of cultural expression, including religious rites. The criminal code penalizes violation of the freedom of religious celebration and sentiment and the desecration of burial sites or human remains; however, charges are seldom, if ever, filed under these laws.

According to the constitution, no member of the clergy of any religion may serve as president or vice president, or as a government minister or judge.

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

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curriculum. Parents have the right to choose the type of religious instruction their children receive.

### Government Practices

Although the law permits Mayan spiritual groups to conduct religious ceremonies at Mayan historical sites on government-owned property, some Mayan leaders stated the government continued to limit 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. In 2008 the Asociacion Oxlajuj Ajpop introduced an initiative to the congress for a sacred sites law, but the draft legislation has been referred to various committees with no action taken.

There was no national framework for determining the nature or content of religious instruction. The Ministry of Education continued to consult with religious groups on a national values program called Living Together in Harmony that integrated general values common to the groups consulted, such as honesty, fraternity, responsibility, and respect, without citing religion or religious teachings, into school curricula.

There was considerable discussion regarding a bill introduced to the national congress in July by Representative Marvin Osorio that would require Biblical education in all public schools. Among the strong supporters of the bill were members of the evangelical community, while other religious leaders, some members of civil society, and Ministry of Education representatives expressed opposition. When the spokesperson for the Guatemalan Secular Humanist Association went before the congress on July 15 to speak against the proposed law, much of the audience, which included representatives from Catholic and evangelical churches, responded with boos, insults, and threats. The bill had not progressed through the legislative process by year's end.

The government required foreign missionaries to obtain tourist visas, which authorities issued for renewable periods of three months. After renewing their tourist visas once, foreign missionaries could apply for temporary residence.

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Several missionaries, even some in the country for several years, reported they chose to remain on tourist visas to avoid the complicated procedure of applying for temporary residence.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Private owners of land in some natural locations considered sacred by Mayan religious groups, such as caves, lagoons, mountains, and forests, continued to deny access, according to Mayan spiritual groups.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials met with leaders of major religious groups and with representatives of faith-based nongovernmental organizations to promote freedom of religion. Embassy officials continued outreach to religious leaders, including those from the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Alliance (the largest organization of Protestant churches representing more than 30,000 individual churches), the Episcopal Conference, regional bishops' offices, representatives from the Presidential Commission against Discrimination and Racism against the Indigenous People of Guatemala, the Foundation for Maya Cultural and Natural Heritage, and other religious organizations and leaders to understand more about religious freedom in the country.