

# **PARAGUAY 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution gives individuals the right to choose, change, and freely practice their religion, and prohibits religious discrimination. It specifically recognizes the right of indigenous communities to express their religion freely. The constitution states that relations between the state and the Catholic Church shall be based on “independence, cooperation, and autonomy.” The government requires all religious groups to register with the Vice Ministry of Worship (VMW). Some religious groups expressed concern that the government disproportionately supported Catholic schools and did not pay many of the teachers in registered, non-Catholic religious schools.

Labor unions and human rights organizations reported discrimination by Mennonite employers, often the predominant source of employment in the remote areas of the Chaco region, who reportedly continued to favor indigenous laborers who had converted to the Mennonite faith over those who had not. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) stated indigenous laborers were not able to file labor discrimination complaints based on religious affiliation because there were few government offices in the Chaco region.

U.S. embassy representatives met with the vice minister of culture at the VMW to discuss alleged employment discrimination based on religious preference and state support to the Catholic Church. Embassy officials also met with religious groups to discuss interfaith respect and dialogue. The Ambassador met with representatives of the Muslim community, and embassy officers met with representatives of the Catholic, evangelical, Jewish, Muslim, and Bahai communities to hear their views on religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.8 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2002 national census, the most recent survey reporting religious affiliation, 90 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 6 percent is evangelical Protestant. Groups that together 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, Mennonites, the Unification Church, and adherents of indigenous tribal beliefs.

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Members of the Mennonite Church, estimated between 135,000 to 150,000, are prominent in the remote areas of the central Chaco and some regions of the eastern part of the country.

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

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides individuals the right to choose, change, and freely practice their religion. The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and specifically recognizes the right of indigenous communities to express their religion freely.

According to the constitution, relations between the state and the Catholic Church are based on “independence, cooperation, and autonomy.” The Catholic Church must, however, comply with all regulations demanded of other churches. The law allows political parties based on a specific faith, but the constitution prohibits members of the clergy from running for public office.

The government requires all religious groups to register with the VMW. Among other requirements, religious groups must demonstrate legal status as a nonprofit organization, submit to financial and criminal background checks, and agree to annual recertification. According to the VMW, 474 religious groups are currently registered. There are no penalties or monetary sanctions if religious groups do not register, but registering offers exemption from value added taxes and other government fees.

Religious instruction in public schools is prohibited. The Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) recognizes only degrees granted by registered religiously-affiliated institutions. Registration for religious schools is not mandatory but permits them to receive subsidies to pay teachers’ salaries.

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

Foreign missionaries must be members of a registered religious group to be eligible for special no-cost, residency visas from the Department of Immigration. If missionaries opt not to register they may enter the country on tourist visas. Missionaries must also register with the MEC.

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The government supports chaplaincy programs for Catholics and other religious groups in the armed forces. These programs include the training of clergy to provide services to members of the armed forces, either deployed in combat zones or on peacekeeping missions.

### **Government Practices**

On October 24, the Supreme Electoral Justice Tribunal barred the mayoral candidacy of Catholic priest Aloisio Dick in the city of Alto Vera because Dick was a member of the clergy.

The MEC continued to pay the salaries of hundreds of teachers in registered schools run by religious groups, most of which are Catholic. Some non-Catholic religious groups stated that the government disproportionately supported Catholic schools and did not pay a sufficient number of teachers in registered, non-Catholic religious schools. The VMW reportedly responded to these concerns and directed its staff to draft legislative proposals to address this discrepancy.

Sources stated that the Catholic Church maintained an influential role within society and government and often issued political statements. They also stated politicians often sought support from Church leaders. Some Protestant groups said they observed government favoritism towards the Catholic Church and complained about what they stated was the nonsecular nature of some government offices and public spaces. Several evangelical groups complained about the extent and nature of government support for the three-day visit of Pope Francis in July, stating the government spent approximately \$15 to \$20 million to prepare, organize, and host the visit. Government officials said Pope Francis is a head of state.

Vice Minister of Culture Dr. Herminio Lobos at the VMW stated in meetings that government enforcement of constitutional protections, registration of religious groups and missionaries, and advocacy of a values-based educational agenda contributed to freedom of religion.

The VMW reported that 450 missionaries registered during the year, most of them Mormons.

On November 3, President Horacio Cartes attended the opening of the Alkhaulafa Al-Rashdeen mosque, the largest mosque in the country, in Ciudad del Este.

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

Labor unions and human rights organizations continue to report favoritism by Mennonite employers in hiring indigenous laborers who had converted to the Mennonite faith over those who had not. Mennonites in remote areas of the Chaco region are often the predominant source of employment. NGOs reported indigenous laborers were not able to file labor discrimination complaints based on religious affiliation because there were few government offices in the Chaco region.

There were reports that Mormon missionaries avoided proselytizing in the departments of Concepcion, San Pedro, and Amambay due to the ongoing conflict with the Paraguayan People's Army and the Armed Farmers Association guerrilla groups. Missionaries stated they were concerned because they were too visible and could become targets for extortion and kidnapping attempts.

A former government interfaith forum became an independent association in March. The association continued to facilitate dialogue among the various faiths and played a key role in working with the VMW on implementing a values-based educational curriculum within the Ministry of Education.

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

U.S. embassy officials met frequently with the Vice Minister of Culture Lobos at the VMW to discuss reported employment discrimination based on religious preference and state support to the Catholic Church.

The Ambassador met with Muslim leaders at the Islamic Cultural and Charity Center in Asuncion. Embassy officials also met with Catholic, evangelical, Bahai, Muslim, and Jewish groups to discuss religious freedom.