

PARAGUAY 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution gives individuals the right to choose, change, and freely practice their religion, and prohibits discrimination based on religion. It recognizes the historic role of the Catholic Church; some religious groups expressed concern that the government disproportionately supported Catholic schools. The government requires all religious groups to register with the Vice Ministry of Worship (VMW) in the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC).

Labor unions and human rights organizations reported Mennonite employers, often the predominant source of employment in the remote areas of the Chaco region, continued to favor indigenous laborers who had converted to the Mennonite faith over those who had not.

U.S. embassy representatives met with the VMW to discuss issues such as employment discrimination based on religious preference and state support to the Catholic Church. Embassy officials also 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 6.7 million (July 2014 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. 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, Bahais, Mennonites, members of the Unification Church, and adherents of indigenous tribal beliefs.

Mennonites, estimated to total between 135,000 to 150,000 members, 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 Framework

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The constitution provides for the right of individuals 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.

The constitution recognizes the historic role of the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church, however, must comply with the same requirements as other churches. The law allows political parties based on a specific faith, but the constitution prohibits clerics from running as candidates for the presidency, vice presidency, or congress.

The government requires all religious groups to register with the VMW in the MEC. To register they 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 471 religious groups currently registered with the VMW. There are no penalties or monetary sanctions if religious groups do not register, but tax-exemption benefits and educational subsidies are based on registration.

Religious instruction in public schools is prohibited. The MEC only recognizes educational degrees granted by religiously-affiliated institutions that are registered. Registration for religious schools is not mandatory. Registration, however, allows religious schools to receive subsidies to pay their teacher's salaries.

Foreign missionaries must be members of a registered religious group to be eligible for special visas from the Department of Immigration. Missionaries themselves must also register with the MEC.

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

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 expressed concern that the government disproportionately

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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 aimed at facilitating dialogue.

Evangelical congressional deputies from the Center for the Adoration of Family Church sometimes held religious meetings on congressional premises, and congress occasionally paid for congressional travel to attend religious conferences. Several government institutions held periodic Catholic masses in official buildings and allowed Catholic shrines in governmental buildings, such as the office of the Comptroller General and the Supreme Court.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Labor unions and human rights organizations reported Mennonite employers, often the predominant source of employment in the remote areas of the Chaco region, continued to favor indigenous laborers who had converted to the Mennonite faith over those who had not. NGOs reported the ability of indigenous laborers to file complaints of labor discrimination based on religious affiliation was limited because there were few governmental offices present in the Chaco region.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials frequently met with the Vice-Minister of Culture at the VMW, Dr. Herminio Lobos, to discuss religious freedom. They also met with representatives of Catholic, Evangelical, Bahai, and Jewish religious groups to support interfaith understanding and to discuss the status of religious freedom.