

BOLIVIA 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution stipulates the state is independent of all religion and provides for “freedom of thought, spirituality, religion and cult, expressed individually or collectively, in public and in private.” The constitution and other laws give educational institutions the right to teach religion, including indigenous spiritual belief classes. Some religious organizations, led predominantly by evangelical Christian groups, expressed concern that the country’s law requiring religious registration could threaten their ability to operate independently and could favor particular religious groups. The constitutional court in July denied a 2015 petition submitted by evangelical leaders challenging the religious registration law. Church leaders have worked with the government on a legislative proposal exempting churches from the registration requirements for the next five years. Following Catholic leaders’ criticism of the government response to drug trafficking, President Evo Morales threatened legal action and increased reporting requirements of church-funded programs and scrutiny of church activities. According to Protestant and Catholic Church leaders, the government employed ethnic Aymara rituals and practices during government events and ceremonies, which the Christian leaders stated contravened the constitutional separation of religion and state.

Evangelical leaders reported incidents in which indigenous religious leaders physically abused several of their pastors and expelled them from rural areas, because of their refusal to participate in ancestral practices and rituals.

U.S. government access to Bolivian government officials is limited. Embassy staff, however, routinely met with religious leaders to underscore the importance of religious freedom. The Charge d’Affaires hosted an interfaith meeting for religious leaders to share experiences. Topics discussed with religious leaders included the government’s respect for religious freedom and practices, the government’s alleged favoring of Andean religious ceremonies and rituals, and longstanding tensions between the Catholic community and the Morales administration.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 10.9 million (July 2016 estimate). According to U.S. government figures, 77 percent of the population identifies as

Roman Catholic and 16 percent as Protestant, including evangelical and Pentecostal groups. Approximately two percent identify with smaller religious groups and five percent self-identify as nonbelievers. There are between 300-400 Muslims and approximately 500 Jews. Many indigenous communities, concentrated in rural areas, practice a mix of Catholic and indigenous traditions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, the state respects and provides for “freedom of thought, spirituality, religion and cult, expressed individually or collectively, in public and in private.” The constitution stipulates the state is independent of all religion.

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, including in access to educational institutions, and protects the right of access to public sport and recreational activities without regard to religion.

The law requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Office of Religion and Nongovernmental Organizations as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in order to operate legally. Registered religious groups receive tax, customs, and other legal benefits. To register, religious organizations must file a notarized listing of the names, identification numbers, tax certificates, and police files of national leaders, as well as notarized lists of names and identification numbers of their entire membership. They also must submit a report of their general activities and financial records. They must repeat this process annually to remain registered; the government reserves the right to revoke an organization’s operating permit if it does not comply. The government may not deny legal recognition to any organization based on its articles of faith, and there is no fee for registration. The complexity of the procedure, however, including several bureaucratic antecedents such as registering the legal name of the organization, causes many organizations to seek legal assistance in order to comply.

Pursuant to an accord with the Holy See, which has diplomatic representation in the country, the Catholic Church is exempt from the registration law.

The constitution and other laws give educational institutions the option to teach religion, including indigenous spiritual belief classes, with the aim of encouraging

mutual respect among religious communities. While religion classes are optional, schools must teach ethics with curriculum materials that promote religious tolerance.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Political and Civil Rights.

Government Practices

The registry of the MFA's Office of Religion and Nongovernmental Organizations counted 434 registered religious groups and approximately nine religious groups in the process of registering. The Constitutional Court in July ruled against a motion filed by the National Association of Evangelicals that challenged the constitutionality of the law requiring churches to register their legal charters with the government. In what they described as an act of "civil disobedience," several evangelical leaders established "house churches" to avoid having to comply with the government's registration requirements. Evangelical groups stated their concern that government registration processes required too much information that could be misused or used malignantly. Evangelical leaders worked with the president and other government officials to create legislation to suspend the registration requirements for all churches for five years. The proposal remained pending in congress.

In April the Bolivian Bishop's Conference publicly stated that narcotraffickers had infiltrated and compromised government institutions. These leaders further stated the drug situation had worsened and narcotraffickers used children as drug mules in the Chapare region. The Bishop's Conference published a letter saying the government was not doing enough to combat the drug problem. In response to these criticisms, President Morales challenged the Catholic Church authorities to provide names of the government officials they alleged were involved in drug trafficking. Morales publicly criticized certain Catholic leaders and issued threats of legal action for alleged crimes, including what the government said were the rapes of children by priests. Catholic Church leaders said the government had placed restrictive reporting requirements on church programs and projects and tax inspectors had increased their scrutiny of all church activities.

According to several evangelical leaders, government officials often participated in interfaith meetings and religious ceremonies. These leaders said the government invited certain groups more frequently than others to participate in official government ceremonies. Catholic and Christian evangelical leaders, said the government favored an Andean spiritual philosophy, especially that of the ethnic

Aymara community, over other religious beliefs, for public statements and ceremonies. They stated this was a violation of the constitution's separation of religion and state. Other observers said senior government officials, including the vice president and regional governor, also attended Catholic masses in their official capacity.

President Morales made verbal statements against various Christian and Catholic Church leaders, saying these leaders and the religions they represented were "pro-imperialist." According to church leaders, the president believed organized Christian religions, including the Catholic Church, shared the beliefs of the "colonizers," and the government should diminish such influences.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Evangelical leaders said several of their pastors in rural areas were victims of physical abuse by indigenous religious leaders for refusing to participate in ancestral rituals. Evangelical Christians reported instances of forceful expulsions of their missionaries or pastors from rural communities by adherents of traditional Andean spiritual beliefs.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. government access to Bolivian government officials is limited. Embassy staff, however, routinely engaged religious leaders to underscore the importance of tolerance and religious freedom. The Charge d'Affaires in October hosted an interfaith meeting for religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues and to engage religious leaders in interfaith dialogue. Religious representatives discussed the government's respect for religious freedom and practices, the alleged favoring of Andean religious ceremonies and rituals, and longstanding tensions between the Catholic community and the Morales administration.