

HONDURAS 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions; however, the government officially recognizes only the Roman Catholic Church. It classifies all other religious groups as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or as unregistered religious organizations, according them fewer rights and privileges than the Catholic Church. Non-Catholic religious groups said the government continued to levy income taxes on the salaries of non-Catholic clergy and tax non-Catholic religious materials received from abroad. Some sectors of society continued to oppose the political activism of some religious groups and the government's close ties with evangelical Protestant groups and the Catholic Church. Seventh-day Adventists continued to state that some educational institutions and private sector places of employment did not respect their religious observance on Saturdays. Jehovah's Witnesses said certain public educational institutions continued to require them to salute the national flag and sing the national anthem, activities contrary to their faith. Representatives of several churches said they were concerned over the government's handling of judicial cases or investigations of legal issues raised by the churches. Some Muslims reported private sector offices continued to deny women the right to wear the hijab, while some Christian groups reported being obliged to wear clothing not conforming to their beliefs in government environments. Representatives of the Jewish community said there were cases of anti-Semitic rhetoric in some political discourse.

Some religious organizations said actively religious individuals and religious leaders were more vulnerable to societal violence because of their prominent positions in society and their efforts to combat gang and other related criminal activities. In March the Evangelical Fellowship of Honduras (CEH), an umbrella group comprising several evangelical Protestant groups, presented a study finding that between 2005 and 2015, at least 31 evangelical Protestant pastors were victims of homicides during robberies and kidnappings, or for refusing to pay extortion payments to gangs, among other reasons. Religious groups stated some media reported incorrect and inflammatory information about the activities of religious leaders. Representatives of the Jewish community expressed concern about anti-Semitic statements on social media.

U.S. embassy officials engaged the vice minister of human rights and the minister of social development and inclusion on the importance of equal rights and

privileges for members of all religious groups as a key component of religious freedom. Embassy representatives emphasized that according all religious groups the same rights and privileges as the Catholic Church would be a positive step. The embassy continued to support modifying registration processes for civil society organizations, including religious groups. Embassy officials discussed with religious leaders and other members of a wide range of religious communities their concerns over the government's unequal treatment of religious groups in the country, including regarding religious observance at school and legal recognition for religious organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9 million (July 2017 estimate). The Catholic Church states it has approximately 6.85 million adherents, constituting 77 percent of the population. According to a 2016 survey by a local marketing research and public opinion company, 48 percent of respondents self-identified as evangelical Protestants, 41 percent as Catholics, 3 percent as other, and 8 percent as unaffiliated.

In the 2015 Latinobarometro regional public opinion survey, 43.6 percent of respondents identify as Catholic, 42.1 percent as evangelical Protestant, 1.8 percent as other, and 12.4 percent as unaffiliated. Other religious groups, with their stated number of adherents, include Seventh-day Adventists (144,000); The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (165,000); the Evangelical Moravian Church (35,960); Jehovah's Witnesses (23,500); and a variety of Anabaptist and Mennonite groups (18,000). Additionally there are small communities of Episcopalians, Lutherans, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Bahais. Evangelical Protestant churches include the Church of God, Assemblies of God, Abundant Life Church, Living Love Church, International Christian Center, and various Great Commission churches. A number of evangelical Protestant churches have no denominational affiliation. The Moravian Church has a broad presence in the La Mosquitia Region in the eastern part of the country. Some indigenous groups and African-Hondurans practice African and Amerindian faiths or incorporate elements of Christianity, African, and Amerindian religions into syncretistic religious practices and beliefs.

A representative of the Muslim community states that it has 2,500 members, of which 90 percent are converts. The Jewish community states it has approximately 200 members.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions as long as that exercise does not contravene other laws or public order. The constitution prohibits religious leaders from holding public office or making political statements. The law distinguishes among legally recognized religious organizations, religious organizations registered as NGOs, and nonregistered religious organizations. The government does not require religious groups to register. By law, only the legislature has the authority to confer status as a legally recognized group; only the Catholic Church has received such recognition. Those recognized by law receive benefits such as tax-exempt status for staff salaries and church materials.

Religious organizations not individually recognized by law may register as NGOs. The government does not significantly distinguish between religious and nonreligious NGOs. To register as an NGO, organizations must have a board of directors and juridical personality. Associations seeking juridical personality must submit an application to the Secretariat of State for Human Rights, Justice, Governance, and Decentralization describing their internal organization, bylaws, and goals. The Office of the Solicitor General reviews applications for juridical personality and renders a constitutional opinion. Approved organizations must submit annual financial and activity reports to the government to remain registered. They may apply to the Ministry of Finance to receive benefits such as tax exemptions and customs duty waivers. Unregistered religious organizations are unable to obtain tax-exempt status or other benefits.

The constitution states public education is secular and allows for the establishment of private schools, including schools run by religious organizations. Various religious organizations run schools, including the Catholic Church, Seventh-day Adventist, and evangelical churches. Parents have the right to choose the kind of education their children receive, including religious education. The government dictates a minimum standardized curriculum for all schools. Some private religious affiliated schools require participation in religious events to graduate.

The government is a party to the Ibero-American Convention on Young People's Rights, which recognizes the right to conscientious objection to obligatory military service.

The government requires foreign missionaries to obtain entry and residence permits, and mandates a local institution or individual sponsor a missionary's application for residency and submit it to immigration authorities. The government has agreements with members of the CEH, the Mormons, and the Seventh-day Adventists, among others, to facilitate entry and residence permits for their missionaries. Groups with which the government does not have written agreements are required to provide proof of employment and income for their missionaries.

Foreign religious workers may request residency for up to five years. To renew their residence permits, religious workers must submit proof of continued employment with the sponsoring church at least 30 days before their residency expires. The law prohibits the immigration of foreign missionaries who practice religions that use witchcraft or satanic rituals, and allows the deportation of foreigners who practice witchcraft or "religious fraud." According to the immigration law, individuals who "fraudulently exercise their [religious] profession or office, or commit fraud against the health or religious beliefs of citizens of the country, or the national patrimony," may be fined or face other legal consequences.

The criminal code protects clergy authorized to operate in the country from being required to testify by the court or the attorney general's office about privileged information obtained in confidence during a religious confession. The law does not require vicars, bishops, and archbishops of the Catholic Church and comparably ranked individuals from other legally recognized religious groups to appear in court if subpoenaed. They are required, however, to make a statement at a location of their choosing.

The official regulations for the penal system state that penitentiaries guarantee the free exercise of religion without preference of one specific religion, as long as that worship is not against the law or public order.

Religious officials face fines of 50,000-100,000 lempiras (\$2,100-\$4,300) and legal bans on performing religious duties for four to six years if they perform a marriage without a civil marriage license.

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

Government Practices

Some religious organizations, including the Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum, an interfaith NGO representing dozens of religious groups, continued to criticize what they said was government preference for the Catholic Church and for religious groups belonging to the evangelical Protestant umbrella organization CEH. Among the criticisms were that the legal recognition of non-Catholic religious groups as NGOs or as unregistered religious organizations accorded them fewer rights and privileges than to the Catholic Church. The groups also objected to the existing application of one uniform set of registration rules for all nonprofit organizations, including all non-Catholic religious groups. Many non-Catholic groups stated that the government should recognize them as religious groups rather than NGOs. The Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum said the current legal and policy framework discriminated against all non-Catholic religious groups. The Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum also noted exclusive benefits for the CEH included continual tax exemptions and waivers on imports. According to the Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum, minority religious groups were often restricted from organizing religious assembly in public squares or parks. According to some forum members, government entities in charge of authorizing the use of such spaces were “influenced by pressures” from the Catholic Church, which they said was “concerned” about the exponential growth of some religious minority organizations.

The official NGO registry office – Unidad de Registro y Seguimiento de Asociaciones Civiles (URSAC) – in the Ministry of Governance received 586 applications for new NGO registration during the year in comparison to 1,228 in 2016. This included 235 applications from religious associations (189 in 2016). Cumulatively, the URSAC has registered approximately 2,500 religious associations, of which 1,385 updated their board of directors and legal documents in 2017. The Ministry of Governance rejected applications that did not fit within the legal categories for which the ministry had legal authority.

Some religious organizations, expressed concern at what they said was unequal treatment by municipal authorities issuing permits to distribute religious material or hold events in public areas.

Representatives of several churches said they were concerned about possible corrupt and other criminal practices by government officials that damaged churches or their interests. One evangelical Protestant church expressed continued concern about the government’s handling of a long-standing internal division within its church. In 2016, a court dismissed charges brought by the church against the head of the official NGO registration office for registering a board of

directors in 2013 that the church had excommunicated. Some church members said the excommunicated group had links to criminal elements; threatened members of the church, including by setting fire to member's homes; confiscated or damaged church property; appointed different pastors; and, closed some of the church's centers of worship. Church authorities stated that government officials refused to take action against the illegal board for criminal actions, possibly due to government corruption or links with criminal networks. The church's appeal to the 2016 court decision was still pending at year's end.

Although the constitution prohibits religious leaders from holding political office, the Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum said some Protestant pastors, elected in 2013, continued to hold elected office despite a Supreme Court ruling that a 2011 law under which they had been elected was unconstitutional.

Some civil society organizations criticized evangelical Protestant groups, and to a lesser degree, the Catholic Church, for what they said was political activism and close ties to the government. These activities included Protestant pastors holding public office; CEH members serving on the government advisory bodies, including the Police Purge Commission, which makes recommendations for police reform; and the inclusion of Catholic and Protestant prayers at government events.

Some Christians reported facing dismissal if they did not adhere to a dress code, such as requiring women to wear pants, in government workplaces, even if the code did not conform to their religious beliefs. Religious leaders reported that some teachers in public schools pressured students to participate in the religious rituals of the teachers' faith.

Representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church reported continued religious freedom concerns at both private and public schools, from the elementary through the university level. Seventh-day Adventist representatives said their students faced continued problems obtaining permission to be absent from class or excused from taking exams on Saturdays for religious reason from the National Autonomous University of Honduras, the National Teachers University, and public schools in the cities of San Pedro Sula, Baracoa, Santa Barbara, Santa Rosa de Copan, and two private universities. Teachers in the Department of Ocotepeque also said they had problems obtaining permission not to work on Saturdays, notwithstanding a letter issued by the secretary of education excusing members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church from Saturday school attendance.

Non-Catholic religious groups continued to criticize the government for not recognizing them as churches and their inability to receive benefits, including tax exemptions for clergy salaries and imported religious materials. A representative of the Jewish community said the community was required to apply for tax-exempt status at the municipal level every year.

The Catholic Church and some other religious groups continued to press the government to recognize weddings performed by religious clergy without the legally required civil marriage certificate.

The government routinely invited Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders to lead prayers at government events and to participate in official functions, committees, and other joint government-civil society activities. Several religious organizations, including a Muslim religious group, criticized a perceived bias by the government in favor of the Catholic Church and evangelical Protestant churches that were members of the CEH.

A rule drafted in 2010 requiring Jehovah's Witnesses to sing the national anthem, salute the national flag, and participate in other patriotic events still remained in the Secretariat of Education's school guidelines, despite a 2014 ruling by the secretariat's legal director that the rule was not enforceable. Representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses articulated their concern over continuing reports of public school officials pressuring Jehovah's Witnesses to participate in public celebrations and other school events that run counter to their beliefs.

The government continued to facilitate missionaries' residency status, including through agreements with some religious groups to facilitate visas for missionaries.

Leaders of the Jewish community reported frequent expressions of anti-Semitism in political discourse and events by political opposition figures, ranging from swastikas spray-painted on public buildings to hate speech in political speeches. The spouse of an opposition presidential candidate publicly lauded Adolf Hitler's legacy, later issuing a public apology for her statements.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In March the CEH presented a study that found that between 2005 and 2015, 30 percent of members of evangelical Protestant and Catholic congregations stated they had been victimized by criminals, reflective of the high levels of general violence and criminality in the country. The report found that during this period at

least 31 evangelical pastors were victims of homicides during robberies or kidnappings, or for refusing to pay extortion payments to gangs, among other reasons. The majority of the study's participants stated they believed their faith and religious practices increased their likelihood of being targeted by criminals, and speculated that the public role and prominence of religious leaders increased the likelihood of their being victimized. Other religious groups reported being victims of generalized violent crime.

In December Jesuit priest Ismael "Padre Melo" Moreno Coto publicly reported receiving threats due to his management of a radio station and NGO, as well as his opposition to the re-election of President Juan Orlando Hernandez in November.

Some Christians said they faced dismissal if they did not adhere to a dress code in private workplaces, such as requiring women to wear pants, even if in conflict with their religious beliefs.

Some Muslim women reported that some banks asked them to remove their hijab when passing through bank security. They said they were usually able to resolve the issue after explaining that the attire was part of their religious practice. Seventh-day Adventists reported the continued refusal of certain private institutions, including places of employment and schools, to permit them to observe Saturday as a day of rest.

Religious leaders reported that some teachers in private schools pressured students to participate in religious rituals of the teachers' faith, or in the case of the Jehovah's Witnesses, to participate in activities counter to their beliefs.

The Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum said it had received some complaints from individuals that some religious leaders discouraged their congregations from participating in interfaith engagements, and noted that some religious leaders in the media referred to other beliefs as sects or made other disparaging remarks.

The Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum, which includes representatives from more than 90 religious and civil society groups, continued its efforts to counter intolerance, discrimination, and the imposition of one religion over others. Religious groups reported working together to develop better relations and cooperate on projects, including between evangelical Protestant groups and the Catholic Church, and the Jewish community and various Christian groups.

Jewish community leaders, representing the two synagogues in the country, said there were cases of anti-Semitic messages in social media and swastikas painted on public buildings. They also said they were concerned that some Christian churches had “adopted” Jewish and Israeli symbolism, some even defining themselves as “Jewish congregations.” The Jewish leaders said some evangelical Protestant groups had issued statements defending or otherwise speaking on behalf of Israel, which the Jewish leaders said had created some tensions between the Jewish community and other religious groups.

Members of the Muslim community said they received some hate messages on their social media sites; however, they stated that they did not believe these messages reflected a broad societal view.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials engaged the vice minister of human rights and justice and the minister of social inclusion and development on the importance of equal treatment for members of all religious groups. Embassy officials said a positive step would be for the government to modify the religious organization registration law to accord all religious groups the same rights and privileges as the Catholic Church. The U.S. government continued to support a development program with the Ministry of Governance to modify registration processes for civil society organizations by creating an online application and renewal process aimed at reducing the burden for NGOs, including religious organizations, to register and file required reports.

Embassy officials continued discussions with religious leaders and other members of religious communities, including evangelical Protestant, Moravian, and Orthodox Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, Muslims, Bahais, and the Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum. These groups said they continued to be concerned over what they stated was the government’s unequal treatment of religious groups, including the absence of a registration law according all religious groups the same rights and privileges as the Catholic Church.