

MEXICO 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution states all persons are free to profess their chosen religious beliefs and to engage in ceremonies and acts of worship. The legislature may not enact laws that establish or prohibit any religion. The constitution provides for the separation of religion and state and defines the country as secular. Government, nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and religious representatives stated enforcement of the constitutional right of religious freedom sometimes conflicted with the constitutional right to autonomy provided to indigenous communities. NGOs, including some religious organizations, reported that inhabitants in some rural and indigenous communities, primarily in the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, were pressured to adhere to the majority religion or face banishment, denial of social services, or imprisonment. Within these communities, some families belonging to minority religions were required to pay for and participate in community and religious gatherings, and in some cases were forcibly displaced by community members. NGOs reported that displaced individuals who sought the assistance or protection of local authorities were often ignored.

The Catholic Multimedia Center (CMC) reported priests and other religious leaders in some parts of the country continued to be targeted and subjected to extortion, death threats, and intimidation by criminal groups. There were multiple reports of priests who were kidnapped and killed. The CMC reported in early December that seven priests were killed during the year. Government officials stated many of these incidents were not a result of targeting for religious beliefs but rather incidents related to crime in the country as a whole. NGOs stated that some priests were targeted because of their advocacy on behalf of human rights of communities. Jewish community representatives reported low levels of anti-Semitism and good interreligious cooperation on addressing instances of anti-Semitism.

U.S. embassy and consulate representatives met with government representatives to discuss concerns about violence toward Catholic priests and other religious leaders and reports of discrimination toward evangelical Protestants in some communities. In August the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with government officials, representatives of the Catholic Church, minority religious groups, and NGOs to discuss reports of religious discrimination. In July the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism met with Jewish community representatives. Embassy officers met with members of religious

groups and NGOs to gather details about specific cases. During the U.S.-Mexico Human Rights Dialogue on October 27, officials from the U.S. government underscored the importance of protecting religious leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 123.2 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2010 census, approximately 83 percent identifies as Roman Catholic and 5 percent as evangelical Protestant. Religious groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Muslims. More than 2 percent of the population reports practicing a religion not otherwise specified, and nearly 5 percent report not practicing any religion. Some indigenous persons adhere to syncretic religions drawing from pre-Hispanic indigenous beliefs.

Official statistics sometimes differ from the membership figures provided by religious groups. Approximately 315,000 individuals identify themselves as Mormon in the 2010 census; Mormon officials, however, state their membership at approximately 1.3 million. There are large Protestant communities in the southern states of Chiapas and Tabasco. In Chiapas, evangelical Protestant leaders state nearly half of the state's 2.4 million inhabitants are members of evangelical groups, but fewer than 5 percent of 2010 census respondents in Chiapas self-identified as evangelical.

According to the 2010 census, the Jewish community numbers approximately 67,500, some 42,000 of whom live in Mexico City and the state of Mexico. Jewish leaders said the total number of Jews in the country is approximately 45,000. Nearly half of the country's approximately 4,000 Muslims are concentrated in Mexico City and the state of Mexico. An estimated half of the approximately 100,000 Mennonites are concentrated in the state of Chihuahua.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states all persons are free to profess their chosen religious beliefs and to engage in ceremonies and acts of worship that do not constitute a crime or offense punishable by law. The congress may not enact laws that establish or prohibit any religion. The constitution provides for the separation of religion and

state and defines the country as secular. It prohibits any form of discrimination, including on the basis of religion.

The constitution states acts of public worship are performed inside places of worship and any performed outside of places of worship are subject to the applicable regulations and laws. Active clergy are forbidden from holding public office, advocating partisan political views, supporting political candidates, or publicly opposing the laws or institutions of the state.

The law states religious groups may not own or administer radio or television stations. Government permission is required for commercial radio or television to transmit religious programming.

Religious groups are not required to register with the government in order to operate. Registration is required, however, to negotiate contracts, purchase or rent land, apply for official building permits, receive tax exemptions, or hold religious meetings outside customary places of worship. To establish a religious association, applicants must certify that the church or religious group observes, practices, propagates, or instructs a religious doctrine or body of religious beliefs; has conducted religious activities in the country for at least five years, thus becoming deeply rooted within the population; has established domicile in the country; and shows sufficient assets to achieve its purpose. Registered associations may freely organize their internal structures and adopt bylaws or rules pertaining to their governance and operations, including the training and appointment of their clergy. They may engage in religious public worship and celebrate acts for the fulfillment of the association's purpose, lawfully and without profit. They may propagate their doctrine within applicable regulations and participate in the creation, management, maintenance, and operation of private welfare, educational, and health institutions, provided the institutions are not for profit.

Religious associations must notify the government of their intention to hold a religious meeting outside their licensed place of worship. Religious associations may not hold political meetings of any kind.

Religious groups must apply for permits to construct new buildings or to convert existing buildings into houses of worship. Any religious building constructed after 1992 is the property of the religious group that built it and is subject to the relevant taxes. All religious buildings erected before 1992 are classified as part of the national patrimony and owned by the state.

The constitution states public education must be secular and maintained entirely apart from any religious doctrine, but religious groups are permitted to operate private schools. To enter a secondary school, a student must have attended an accredited primary school. Homeschooling is allowed at the secondary level after completion of schooling at an accredited primary school.

The federal government coordinates religious affairs through the Interior Ministry (SEGOB). Within SEGOB, the General Directorate for Religious Associations (DGAR) promotes religious tolerance, conducts conflict mediation, and investigates cases of religious intolerance. The National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) is an autonomous federal agency responsible for ensuring the rights of nondiscrimination and equal opportunity, including for minority religious groups. If a party presents a dispute based on allegations of religious intolerance, the DGAR is charged with mediating a solution. If mediation fails, the parties may submit the issue to the DGAR for binding arbitration. If the parties do not agree to this procedure, one or the other may seek judicial redress.

Each of the 32 states has administrative offices with responsibility over religious affairs. The states of Chiapas, Guerrero, Yucatan, and Oaxaca have undersecretaries at the local interior ministries for religious affairs.

There are 8,737 religious associations registered by the DGAR. These include 8,698 Christian (an increase of 423 from 2015), 13 Buddhist, 10 Jewish, two Hindu, three Islamic, and two International Society for Krishna Consciousness groups.

According to the constitution, indigenous communities have the right to autonomy and may “decide their internal forms of coexistence” and have legal systems to “regulate and solve their internal conflicts.” These rights are subject to the general principles and fundamental rights provided by the constitution, including freedom of religion.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The country claims the following constitutional limitations to the ICCPR: a reservation (to Article 25) that religious ministers have neither a passive vote nor the right to form political associations; and a limitation (to Article 18) that religious acts must be performed in places of worship unless granted prior permission, and professional education for ministers is not officially recognized.

Government Practices

Some evangelical groups reported incidents of religious abuses and discrimination and said the government either did not respond or did not respond adequately. They said some Protestants in mainly rural and/or indigenous areas in Chiapas and Oaxaca were pressured to convert to Catholicism, were displaced, were arbitrarily detained by local authorities, or had their property destroyed by community leaders.

According to some legal experts and NGOs, the ambiguity of the relationship between the rights laid out in the constitution and the law allowing indigenous communities autonomy to exercise traditional law gave local authorities the ability to punish some members of minority religious groups or force them to follow the majority religion. NGOs and some religious organizations reported that a number of rural and indigenous communities expected inhabitants to adhere to the majority religion, including paying for and participating in community and religious gatherings. There were reports of those adhering to the minority religious group or those coming in from outside the community to proselytize being discriminated against by others within the community. Some members of minority religious groups in indigenous communities stated local authorities denied them public benefits and utilities service due to their religious affiliation.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reported that in May, 86 families from three churches in Mitziton and San Cristobal de las Casas (state of Chiapas) were forcibly displaced from their communities after they refused to make financial contributions to a Catholic festival.

Luis Herrera, director of the NGO Coordination of Christian Organizations of Chiapas (COOC), reported that seven Protestants were forcibly displaced in January by non-Protestant residents from their community in Las Margaritas, Chiapas. The NGO Impulso 18 said these individuals were asked to present themselves during a village assembly on December 15, 2015 and sign a document confirming they had renounced their faith. Herrera said the individuals were imprisoned for two days and ordered to pay a fine for refusing to renounce their faith. Municipal, state, and federal officials were reportedly notified, but an investigation had not yet been opened as of the end of the year. According to Herrera, no agreement for their return was reached by year's end.

According to the NGO Libertad y Dignidad (Liberty and Dignity), local authorities arbitrarily detained evangelical Christians Lauro Perez Nunez and Misael Perez for their religious beliefs on March 28 in La Chacalaca municipality in Oaxaca. The detention followed what they said was their expulsion from their community, with 10 other families, for refusing to renounce their beliefs. They were held for several hours without charge before being released.

Libertad y Dignidad reported 40 families were expelled by residents from the municipalities of Huixtan, La Trinitaria, Comitán, and Ocoyigo in Chiapas between January and June because they had converted to Protestantism.

According to Impulso 18, on January 26 local authorities forcibly displaced 50 individuals from 20 Protestant families from their homes in Tuxpan de Bolaos, Jalisco, after the families neither participated in nor contributed to the town's Catholic holiday festivities. The individuals were given three hours to leave the village after a community assembly voted to have them removed and threatened to lynch them if they did not obey the order to leave. Impulso 18 stated the group was dropped off in nearby mountains and that state authorities, although contacted, did not intervene.

According to Libertad y Dignidad, evangelical Christians were required in some communities to pay for Catholic religious festivities even if they did not celebrate. The NGO reported eight evangelical Christian families in Ixcaquixtla, Puebla were evicted from their homes for declining to contribute 2,000 pesos (\$97) to the town's Catholic celebrations. Local indigenous authorities briefly detained three evangelical Christians for refusing to pay.

According to COOC, there was no progress on the return of 15 acres of land seized in 2015 from 30 Protestant families in Mariano Matamoros, Chiapas. In April local authorities said an agreement to return their land would be signed soon, but there was no agreement at year's end.

CSW reported on February 23 that 27 Protestant families in Union Juárez, Chiapas had their access to water and electricity restored by local authorities. Access had been cut off since 2014 when the families refused to contribute money to or participate in Catholic festivals.

On February 5, the Hidalgo state Public Ministry oversaw an agreement with Chichiltepec village officials that allowed two Protestant men to return to their homes after they were displaced in March 2015 for refusing to renounce their faith.

On April 23, the municipal authority in Santa Catarina Yosonotu, Oaxaca prohibited the public ministry of Jehovah's Witnesses in the municipality. DGAR was investigating as of the end of the year.

In some cases, DGAR worked closely with state and local officials on criminal investigations involving religious groups. As of the end of the year, DGAR investigated six cases related to religious freedom at the federal level, compared to 10 in 2015. According to DGAR, most incidents of religious discrimination were under the jurisdiction of the state government rather than the federal government. Municipal and state officials commonly mediated disputes among religious groups; however, evangelical groups reported that officials rarely pursued legal remedies against offending local leaders and were often unaware of the applicable laws. The groups stated there were few investigations and prosecutions related to crimes or abuses motivated by an individual's belief or practice, stating that this was partially a result of the lack of resources devoted to federal and state agencies and organizations working on religious freedom.

On February 15, CSW reported that unknown assailants attacked the Fuente de Fe, Alabanza y Poder church in Zinacantan city, Chiapas. CSW indicated that the assailants broke into the church and burned the pulpit, curtains, chairs, and tables. Church officials said the attack was religiously motivated. DGAR stated it was an isolated incident perpetrated by common criminals and not motivated by religion.

According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, after townspeople of Tamazulapam, Oaxaca opposed the construction of a Kingdom Hall for worship in May, the municipal authority issued an order to stop construction. The Directorate of Religious Affairs of Oaxaca spoke with the opponents and the municipal authorities without success. The Jehovah's Witnesses stated they were considering submitting a claim for legal protection.

In May the municipal authority of San Jorge Nuchita, Huajuapam, Oaxaca prohibited Jehovah's Witnesses from proselytizing house to house. An investigation by the Directorate of Religious Affairs of Oaxaca was ongoing at the end of the year.

The federal government promoted dialogue with religious actors with the stated goal of ensuring the exercise of religious freedom and resolving conflicts arising from religious intolerance. CONAPRED conducted outreach efforts, facilitated training, and distributed publications designed to combat discrimination. According to CONAPRED, the majority of religious discrimination complaints it

received were related to religious attire or to some hospitals declining to treat Jehovah's Witnesses for their refusal to engage in blood transfusions. In some cases, CONAPRED assisted in conflict mediation related to these complaints.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to NGOs and press reports, Catholic priests and other religious leaders continued to be targeted and were the victims of extortion attempts, death threats, and intimidation by organized criminal groups. The government stated many of these incidents were not a result of targeting for religious beliefs but rather incidents related to crime in the country as a whole.

The CMC reported the most dangerous states for priests were Veracruz, Mexico State, Michoacan, and Guerrero. The CMC stated in early December the number of priests killed during the year increased from two in 2015 to seven, and the number of priests who were victims of extortion increased by 70 percent from 2015.

On September 19, the bodies of Fathers Alejo Nabor Jiménez and Jose Alfredo Suarez were found on the outskirts of Poza Rica, Veracruz. They were abducted the day before from their parish. Two individuals were arrested but not charged by year's end.

On September 19, Catholic priest Alfredo Lopez Guillen was kidnapped from Puruandiro, Michoacan, and his body was found on September 24. According to news reports, the attorney general of Michoacan said two men admitted to having killed the priest and were arrested on October 3.

On October 1, four Catholic missionaries were kidnapped and shot in Michoacan by armed assailants. Their bodies were found on the side of the road near Apatzingan. The Michoacan state prosecutor's office said on December 21 it arrested four individuals.

In November Catholic priest Jose Luis Sanchez Ruiz was kidnapped in Catemaco, Veracruz. He was found alive three days later with signs of torture. According to Church officials, the priest had received threats prior to the kidnapping because he defended human rights and spoke out on social causes, including criticizing corruption and crime in Catemaco.

According to CSW, on May 18, an assailant attacked Pastor Guillermo Favela, president of the Tijuana Ministerial Evangelical Alliance and pastor of the Rios de Agua Viva Church, near the church. The assailant demanded protection money from the church and threatened to cut the pastor's fingers off for refusing. The assailant fled the scene after stabbing the pastor. CSW reported the assailant was captured by local authorities and later released.

News reports indicated that on January 4, armed Catholic villagers in Leyva Velazquez, Chiapas raided and destroyed the homes of Protestants in the village, causing them to flee to nearby mountains. According to Impulso 18, villagers blocked the entrances to the village to keep government and security officials from entering and assisting the displaced Protestant villagers.

According to a faith-based organization in Nogales, Sonora on September 14, individuals broke into and vandalized the group's soup kitchen, including stealing a crucifix, defecating on crosses, and putting an image of the Virgin Mary into a black bag. The organization said it was targeted by organized criminal groups due to its humanitarian aid work in the community.

During a February trip to the country, Pope Francis met with bishops in the Mexico City Metropolitan Cathedral, citing narco-trafficking as a challenge to society and the Catholic Church. During Mass at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the pope spoke about the persecution of indigenous communities and their role in the Catholic Church, with his speech translated into several local indigenous languages.

Jewish community representatives reported being accepted and respected by the government and within society.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy and consulate representatives met with government officials responsible for religious and indigenous affairs at the federal and state levels, raising concerns regarding the deaths of Catholic priests and reported abuses against evangelical Christians.

During a trip to Mexico City and Pachuca, Hidalgo in August, the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom met with government officials, representatives of the Catholic Church and minority religious groups, and NGOs to discuss reports of religious discrimination. In July the Special Envoy to Monitor

and Combat Anti-Semitism met with members of the Mexico City Jewish community.

Embassy officers met with members of religious groups and religiously affiliated NGOs including Libertad y Dignidad, the Central Jewish Committee, Tribuna Israelita, the Catholic Multimedia Center, Impulso 18, and Coordination of Christian Organizations to discuss safety for priests working on humanitarian issues, to assess the status of religious freedom, and to express support for religious tolerance.

During the U.S.-Mexico Human Rights Dialogue on October 27, officials from the Department of State underscored the importance of protecting human rights defenders, which included religious leaders.