

PARAGUAY 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution accords 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 the relationship between the state and the Catholic Church is based on “independence, cooperation, and autonomy.” The constitution does not address relations between the state and other religious groups. Representatives of the Catholic Christian Apostolic National Church of Paraguay (ICCAN) said the Vice Ministry of Worship (VMW) again rejected their registration request; ICCAN representatives said they believed the Roman Catholic Church had “blocked” ICCAN’s request. According to ICCAN sources, the VMW continued its efforts to remove nonprofit status from churches that the government said had not complied fully with the law prohibiting these entities from engaging in profitmaking activities. Religious groups not affiliated with the Catholic Church said the government disproportionately supported and subsidized teacher salaries at Catholic schools. Representatives of the local Jewish community reported incidents of local government candidates making anti-Semitic remarks during campaign events in advance of December 2017 primaries and the April 2018 general election.

Human rights organizations stated Mennonite employers, 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 vice minister of culture at the VMW and discussed challenges ICCAN and some other religious groups faced with registration, the processing of claims of religious discrimination, and the unequal provision of state funding for salaries at schools run by religious groups. Embassy officials also inquired about the VMW’s efforts to remove nonprofit status from churches. Embassy officials met with representatives of the Catholic, Mennonite, Catholic Christian Apostolic, and Jewish communities to discuss interfaith respect for religious diversity and hear their views on the status of religious freedom in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.9 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2002 national census, the most recent survey reporting religious affiliation, 90 percent of the population is Roman Catholic (a 2014 *Latinobarometro* report estimated 88 percent is Roman Catholic) and 6 percent evangelical Protestant. Groups that together constitute 4 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Muslims, Buddhists, Mennonites, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), and adherents of indigenous tribal beliefs. Members of the Mennonite Church, estimated between 30,000 and 46,000, are prominent in the remote areas of the central Chaco and some regions of the eastern part of the country. ICCAN estimated its membership at more than 100,000.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides individuals, including members of indigenous communities, 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, the relationship between the state and the Catholic Church is based on "independence, cooperation, and autonomy." The Catholic Church, however, must comply with all regulations the state imposes on other churches and non-Christian religious groups. The law allows political parties based on a specific faith, but the constitution prohibits active members of the clergy from any religious group from running for public office. The constitution does not address relations between the state and other religious groups.

The government requires all religious groups to register with the VMW. The Anti-Money Laundering National Secretariat (SEPRELAD) requires that all religious organizations register as nonfinancial agents. Among other requirements, religious groups must demonstrate legal status as a nonprofit organization and agree to annual recertification. Religious leaders must submit to financial and criminal background checks. According to the VMW, 512 religious groups have active registrations with the government, including 12 new groups registered during the year. There are no penalties or monetary sanctions if religious groups do not register, but registration offers exemption from value-added taxes and other government fees.

The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools. The constitution provides private schools the right to offer religious education, with the only requirements for staff being merit and ethical integrity. Registration for private religious schools is not mandatory, but the Ministry of Education and Culture recognizes only degrees granted by registered institutions. Additionally, only registered schools with nonprofit status may receive subsidies for teachers' salaries.

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

Foreign missionaries who are members of registered religious groups are eligible for no-cost residency visas from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They must also register annually with the VMW. Missionaries choosing not to register may enter the country on tourist visas.

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

Government Practices

ICCAN representatives said the VMW had again rejected their registration request. ICCAN sources stated they believed the Roman Catholic Church had pressured the government not to register the ICCAN. ICCAN representatives also said the government continued not to recognize their claim to land they said the Catholic Church had taken from them in 1840.

According to ICCAN sources, the VMW continued its efforts to remove nonprofit status from churches that, according to the government, had not complied fully with the law prohibiting these entities from engaging in profitmaking activities.

The Ministry of Education and Culture continued to pay the salaries of hundreds of teachers in registered, nonprofit schools operated by predominantly Catholic religious groups. Some non-Catholic religious groups, including the Jewish and Mennonite communities, stated the government disproportionately supported Catholic schools and did not pay a commensurate number of teachers in registered, non-Catholic religious schools. The VMW declined to provide any data but said the state subsidized some religious schools but not others. According to the VMW, some registered religious schools were not eligible for government support because these schools were not complying with their nonprofit mandates.

Representatives of the local Jewish community said there were incidents of local government candidates making anti-Semitic remarks during campaign events in advance of primary elections and the April 2018 general election. The representatives did not provide specifics on what date or which candidate.

The VMW reported that 557 foreign missionaries registered or reregistered during the year, most of them Mormons.

The government continued to support chaplaincy programs open to all religious groups in the armed forces. The programs included the training of clergy to provide services to members of the armed forces deployed either in combat zones or on peacekeeping missions. The government also continued to allow religious groups to operate and provide services of different religions within prisons for adults, women, and youth; however, during the year only Christian groups continued to make use of this option.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Observers, including politicians, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), political pundits, and the press stated the Catholic Church continued to maintain an influential role within society and government. For example, immediately following March 31 protests that had led to the burning of the congressional assembly headquarters, the Church initiated and hosted a political dialogue. No other religious organizations or denominations participated, nor did any other groups say they had received an invitation to participate.

Labor unions and human rights organizations continued to state that Mennonite employers gave hiring preferences to indigenous laborers who had converted to the Mennonite faith over those who had not. Mennonites in remote areas of the Chaco region often remained the predominant source of employment. NGO representatives working with indigenous communities, prosecutors staff at the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Unit located in the Office of the Attorney General, and indigenous leaders said many indigenous citizens did not understand their right to file employment discrimination complaints. These sources also said some indigenous citizens feared discrimination and retaliation from current or future employers if they filed a complaint. Human rights organizations continued to state that Mennonite employers did not respect indigenous religious holidays.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with Vice Minister Herminio Lobos at the VMW to discuss issues the ICCAN and some other religious groups faced with registration, challenges in processing claims of religious discrimination, and the unequal provision of state funding for salaries at schools run by religious groups. Embassy officials also inquired about the VMW's efforts to remove nonprofit status from churches that, according to the government, had not complied fully with the law prohibiting these entities from engaging in profitmaking activities, as well as SEPRELAD's requirement that all churches register as nonfinancial agents.

Embassy officials met with Catholic, Mennonite, Catholic Christian Apostolic, and Jewish leaders and discussed religious discrimination and the government's attitude to their constituencies.