

PARAGUAY 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution gives 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 relations between the state and the Catholic Church are based on “independence, cooperation, and autonomy.” The government requires all religious groups to register with the Vice Ministry of Worship (VMW), a sub-unit within the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), but there are no sanctions for nonregistration and some religious groups have not registered. One group was reportedly denied a registration request. The constitution guarantees an equal right to religious education. Religious groups expressed concern the government disproportionately supported Catholic schools; the VMW stated the government lacked sufficient funding to pay teachers in all registered, non-Catholic religious schools. Some Protestant groups stated there was government favoritism towards the Catholic Church and voiced concerns that some government offices, activities, and spaces operated in a non-secular manner, including the existence of government offices with Catholic shrines or prayer rooms.

Labor unions and 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 to discuss alleged employment discrimination based on religious preference, official support to the Catholic Church, a pending antidiscrimination bill, and a new provision which would allow the government to sanction churches that abuse religious freedom. Embassy officials met with representatives of the Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Jewish, and Buddhist communities to discuss interfaith respect and dialogue and to hear their views on religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.9 million (July 2016). According to the 2002 national census, the most recent survey reporting religious affiliation, 90 percent of the population 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 Unification Church, and adherents of indigenous tribal beliefs. Recent surveys by market research agencies indicate the percentage of non-Catholic religious groups, especially evangelical Protestants, has increased significantly since 2002.

Members of the Mennonite Church, estimated between 135,000 and 150,000, are prominent in the remote areas of the central Chaco and some regions of the eastern part of the country. Members of evangelical Protestant churches are numerous in major urban areas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides individuals 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, relations between the state and the Catholic Church are based on "independence, cooperation, and autonomy." The Catholic Church, however, must comply with all regulations the state imposes on other churches. The law allows political parties based on a specific faith, but the constitution prohibits members of the clergy from running for public office.

The government requires all religious groups to register with the VMW. Among other requirements, religious groups must demonstrate legal status as a nonprofit organization and agree to annual recertification, and religious leaders must submit to financial and criminal background checks. According to the VMW, 487 religious groups are currently registered. 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.

Religious instruction in public schools is prohibited. 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 MEC recognizes only degrees granted by registered institutions and 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 with the VMW. Missionaries who choose not to register may enter the country on tourist visas.

The government supports chaplaincy programs in the armed forces, which are open to all religious groups. These programs train clergy to provide services to members of the armed forces deployed either in combat zones or on peacekeeping missions. The government also allows religious groups to operate and provide different types of religious services within prisons for adults, women, and youth; only Christian churches participate in this program, although there are no reports suggesting that the government has limited other groups from participating.

The Anti-Money Laundering National Secretariat (SEPRELAD) requires that all churches register as nonfinancial agents.

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

Government Practices

On June 28, media outlets reported the VMW refused to register the Catholic Christian Apostolic National Church of Paraguay (ICCAN). Founded in 1815, the church served as the country's Catholic Church when diplomatic relations with the Vatican were severed after independence in 1811. The church ceased to operate in 1840, but was reestablished in 1992. ICCAN leaders said that even though the church had been legally registered with the Ministry of Interior, it was unable to secure registration from the VMW. ICCAN said that the VMW refused to recognize ICCAN because of pressure from Catholic Church authorities. The VMW said the ICCAN had not obtained certification as a legal entity from the Ministry of Interior.

The VMW reported no complaints of violations of religious freedom during the year.

The MEC continued to pay the salaries of hundreds of teachers in registered private schools operated by religious groups, most of them Catholic. Some non-Catholic religious groups stated the government disproportionately supported

Catholic schools and did not pay a commensurate number of teachers in registered, non-Catholic religious schools. The VMW stated the government lacked sufficient funding to pay teacher salaries for all registered, non-Catholic religious schools, and expressed concerns that some registered religious schools were not conforming to the nonprofit nature of their mandates. Some non-Catholic religious groups said the MEC should review its methodology for awarding teacher subsidies.

Observers stated that the Catholic Church maintained an influential role within society and government, often issuing political statements. In the lead-up to the Virgin of Caacupe celebrations on December 8, for example, church leaders gave several sermons that touched on political topics. Bishop of San Juan Bautista de las Misiones Mario Melanio Medina called upon the youth of the country to fight against public corruption and other abuses of government in a highly publicized public sermon on December 3. The Catholic Church also continued to seek to influence public policy, including government positions on human rights in the United Nations and other international forums, and domestic antidiscrimination legislation. Some Protestant groups said there was government favoritism towards the Catholic Church. Many government offices continued to have Catholic shrines or prayer rooms, though there were no reports that the government rejected requests for shrines from other religious groups. The Catholic Virgin of Caacupe holiday was also a government holiday.

The head of the VMW, Vice Minister (VM) of Worship Dr. Herminio Lobos, underscored the importance of a “values-based” educational agenda not specifically associated with one specific religious group, stating this contributed to freedom of religion. The Inter-Religious Forum, run by religious leaders from various faiths, worked with the VMW on implementing a values-based educational curriculum within the Ministry of Education. VM Lobos stated that the government must enforce constitutional protections and registration of religious groups and missionaries.

Evangelical Protestant groups stated the paperwork required by SEPRELAD to register as a nonfinancial agent was cumbersome for smaller churches lacking the administrative capacity to respond to lengthy data requests.

The VMW reported that 365 missionaries registered during the year, most of them Mormons. Of the total, 208 were foreign nationals.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Labor unions and human rights organizations continued to report favoritism by Mennonite employers in hiring 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. Graciela Congo, leader of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores labor union, and human rights activists reported indigenous laborers were not able to file labor discrimination complaints based on religious affiliation because there were few government offices in the Chaco region outside of the major towns, which were difficult for many in the region to access. Additionally, many indigenous citizens did not understand their right to file such discrimination complaints and feared discrimination and retaliation from current or future employers if they filed a complaint. Human rights organizations stated that Mennonite employers did not respect indigenous religious holidays.

The Inter-Religious Forum continued to facilitate dialogue among the various faiths through periodic meetings among religious leaders. Its members met several times throughout the year among themselves and with the MEC. On September 21, several leaders from different religious groups met in the Metropolitan Cathedral to hold a simultaneous prayer in conjunction with the World Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi, Italy.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy officials met frequently with VM Lobos at the VMW to discuss reported employment discrimination based on religious preference and provision of state funding to the Catholic Church for education. Embassy officials also raised employment discrimination in the Chaco Region and the ICCAN Church. In addition, embassy officials inquired about the VMW's efforts to remove nonprofit status from churches that broke the law, as well as SEPRALAD's requirement that churches register as nonfinancial agents.

Embassy officials met with Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Buddhist, and Jewish groups to discuss religious freedom and solicit their opinions about religious discrimination. Embassy officials also met with Muslim leaders in Asuncion and Ciudad del Este, the two largest communities, to hear about their experiences regarding religious freedom. The embassy created a holiday video for social media publication in December that promoted tolerance during the various religious celebrations.