

HONDURAS 2018 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. On November 21, National Congress President Mauricio Oliva introduced legislation to amend the article of the constitution prohibiting religious leaders from running for elected office. Religious groups and politicians stated mixed reactions to the proposed reform. In May a National Party congressman presented a motion before congress to permit reading the Bible in primary and secondary schools. Diverse faith groups spoke out against the motion, stating that reading the Bible would violate the constitutional provisions that education should be provided to society without discrimination of any kind. Non-Catholic religious groups again said the government continued to levy income taxes on the salaries of non-Catholic clergy and to tax non-Catholic religious materials received from abroad. Some sectors of society again opposed the political activism of certain religious groups and the government's close ties with evangelical Protestant groups and the Catholic Church, including via prayers at official events. Seventh-day Adventists still stated some public educational institutions did not respect their religious observance on Saturdays. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to state that certain public educational institutions required them to salute the national flag and sing the national anthem, activities contrary to their faith.

In June media reported that two unknown assailants killed a pastor in Santa Barbara Department. The Evangelical Fellowship of Honduras (CEH) reported two near-fatal attacks on local church leaders. It was unclear if these were gang-related killings; police investigations continued at year's end. Some religious organizations continued to state religious leaders were more vulnerable to societal violence, including extortion and threats, because of their prominent positions in society and their ongoing presence and work in areas with minimal state presence. The CEH reported widespread extortion of church leaders and congregation members. While stating that unlike in past years it had not recorded killings of pastors or church leaders, the CEH noted an increase in threats against pastors and church leaders located in areas known for gang or narcotics trafficking activities. The Archdiocese of Tegucigalpa did not record any killings of church officials; however, local media noted killings of Protestant pastors during the year.

In April the U.S. government launched a new program to support civil society organizations, including faith-based organizations, to operate freely and to support their right to association and freedom of expression; the program will evaluate and support transparency in the NGO registration process. Embassy officials engaged with religious leaders and other members of a wide range of religious communities regarding societal violence and their concerns regarding the government's dealings with religious groups in the country, including religious observance at school and legal recognition for religious organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.2 million (July 2018 estimate). The Roman Catholic Church estimates 63-65 percent of the population is Catholic. 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 Roman Catholics, 3 percent as other, and 8 percent as unaffiliated.

In the 2015 Latinobarometro regional public opinion survey, 43.6 percent of respondents identified 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 (146,000), and Jehovah's Witnesses (23,100). Other religious groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Episcopalians, Lutherans, Antioquia Orthodox Apostolic Catholic Church, Muslims, Jews, Baha'is, Evangelical Moravian Church, and several Anabaptist and Mennonite groups. 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 Afro-Hondurans practice African and Amerindian faiths or incorporate elements of Christianity, African, and Amerindian religions into syncretistic religious practices and beliefs.

According to a representative of the Muslim community, the community has more than 3,100 members, of whom 90 percent are converts. The Antioquia Orthodox

Apostolic Catholic community counts nearly 1,800 members. The Jewish community states it has approximately 250 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. An article of 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 Roman 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 (standing as a legal entity). Associations seeking juridical personality must submit an application to the Secretariat of Government, Justice, 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. Public schools do not teach religion; however, private schools may include religion as part of the curriculum. Various religious organizations run schools, including the Roman Catholic Church, Seventh-day Adventist, and evangelical Protestant 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 religiously 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 to sponsor a missionary's application for residency and submit it to immigration authorities. The government has agreements with the CEH, the Church of Jesus Christ, and 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 religious group 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 it 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 Roman 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 for 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 (\$2,000-\$4,000) 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

On November 21, National Congress President Oliva introduced legislation to amend the article of the constitution that prohibits religious leaders from running for elected office. Religious groups and politicians stated mixed reactions to the proposed reform; one congressional representative said the country was a secular state and should not commingle religion with politics, while several evangelical Protestant pastors supported the reform. Discussion of the law continued through the end of the year.

On May 10, National Party Congressman Tomas Zambrano presented a motion before congress to permit the reading of the Bible in primary and secondary schools. Representatives from several religious groups, including the Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum, Muslim, Church of Jesus Christ, and Seventh-day Adventist communities, expressed concern about the motion, noting the motion would violate constitutional precepts guaranteeing secular education. Protests outside the congressional building and in schools against the motion occurred in May. On May 16, the Association of Freedom of Thought filed a constitutional challenge against the motion; however, the court ruled on June 18 it would not admit the challenge because the motion had not advanced through congress by that time. Congress had not considered the motion as of year's end.

Some religious organizations, including the Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum, an interfaith NGO representing more than 90 religious and civil society groups, again criticized what they said was government preference for the Catholic Church and for religious groups belonging to the evangelical Protestant umbrella organization CEH. The forum, which included neither Catholic nor evangelical Protestant churches affiliated with the CEH, criticized the legal recognition of non-Catholic religious groups as NGOs or as unregistered religious organizations – which they said accorded them fewer rights and privileges than to the Catholic Church. The groups also continued to object to the existing application of one uniform set of registration rules for all nonprofit organizations, including all non-Catholic religious groups. Non-Catholic groups again said the government should recognize them as religious groups rather than NGOs. The Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum again stated the government routinely invited Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders, but not representatives of other religious groups, to lead prayers at government events and to participate in official functions, committees, and other

joint government-civil society activities. Additionally, non-Catholic religious groups continued to criticize the government for not recognizing them as churches and for their inability to receive benefits, including tax exemptions for clergy salaries and imported religious materials. The Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum said the current legal and policy framework discriminated against all non-Catholic religious groups, and they highlighted that the government provided exclusive benefits to the CEH, including continual tax exemptions and waivers on imports.

The official NGO registry office – the Unit to Register and Monitor Civil Society Organizations (Unidad de Registro y Seguimiento de Asociaciones Civiles, or URSAC) – in the Ministry of Governance, Justice, and Decentralization received 186 applications during the year from religious associations (235 in 2017). During the year, the URSAC registered 133 religious associations in its registration system, while the remaining applications were pending, awaiting additional information. The URSAC noted that it did not deny any registration requests by religious associations during the year.

Religious leaders continued to report some teachers in public schools pressured students to participate in the religious rituals of the teachers' faith. According to the Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum, a teacher and community leader led prayers in a specific way in a public school in Tegucigalpa. When one student objected, noting he prayed in a different way, the community leader insisted that the student pray in the manner in which the teacher conducted prayers – standing up, instead of kneeling down.

Representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church continued to express concerns regarding religious freedom 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 reasons from the National Autonomous University of Honduras, the National Teachers University. Religious leaders also cited violations in public schools in the cities of Santa Rita, Yoro Department; San Pedro Sula, Cortes Department; Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara Department; Santa Rosa de Copan, Copan Department; and Lepaera, Lempira Department. Representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church noted the Supreme Court still had not addressed a constitutional challenge that Adventist students filed in 2015 seeking recognition of their right to religious freedom. Specifically, the students were seeking alternatives to taking classes or exams on Saturdays.

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 continued to state their concern about public school officials pressuring Jehovah's Witnesses to participate in public celebrations and other school events running counter to their beliefs, including singing the national anthem at graduation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The CEH reported that most violence against its members originated from criminal organizations, noting that many of its member churches were present in areas of high violence with minimal state presence. Media reported two unknown assailants beat an evangelical pastor to death in Santa Barbara Department in June. The CEH cited two near-fatal attacks during the year, including one case in which gang members shot a church leader on her doorstep in Tegucigalpa as a warning to her church to pay extortion money. In July an unknown individual shot a pastor in his church in Ocotepeque Department. It was unclear if these killings were tied to gang activity; police investigations continued at year's end. CEH reported instances where gangs gave entire families 24 hours' notice to vacate their homes. The CEH also reported widespread extortion of Protestant church leaders and congregation members. While stating that unlike in past years it had not recorded killings of pastors or church leaders, the CEH flagged an increase in threats against pastors and church leaders located in areas known for gang or narcotics trafficking activities. Despite the attacks, the CEH praised government efforts to dismantle gangs, noting an overall decline in the level of violence and the incarceration of many gang leaders. The Catholic Archdiocese of Tegucigalpa commented that its priests and laypersons operated effectively throughout the country and did not record any killings of church officials.

Jesuit priest Ismael "Padre Melo" Moreno Coto continued to report publicly that he had received threats on multiple occasions. He said the threats were due to his management of Radio Progress, a Jesuit radio station and NGO, and because he opposed President Juan Orlando Hernandez.

Some Muslim women continued to report some banks asked them to remove their hijabs when passing through bank security. They said they were usually able to resolve the issue after explaining the attire was part of their religious practice. Some Muslims said private sector offices continued to prohibit women from

wearing the hijab. Representatives of the Islamic community said they received a few derogatory messages on social media but emphasized they received far more positive and supportive comments than negative messages. 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.

The Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum continued its efforts to counter intolerance, discrimination, and the imposition of one religion over others. The organization held three international congresses and more than 20 workshops during the year. It also reported that it engaged regularly with traditional media and over social media. Religious groups reported working together to develop better relations and cooperate on projects, including their joint collaboration against the congressional motion to read the Bible in public schools.

Antioquia Orthodox Apostolic Catholic Church religious leaders reported widespread mischaracterization of their religion, noting that societal groups often referred to the church as the “the Church of the Turks” due to the Orthodox Church’s historic roots in Turkey.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In April the U.S. government launched a new program to support civil society organizations, including the rights of faith-based organizations to operate freely. The program’s central objective was to support the transparency of the NGO registration process for civil society organizations, including religious groups, through technical assistance and training delivered to the Ministry of Governance, Justice, and Decentralization.

Embassy officials continued discussions with religious leaders and other members of religious communities regarding societal violence and concerns over the government’s dealings with religious groups in the country, such as religious observance at school and legal recognition for religious organizations, including with evangelical Protestants, Orthodox Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, Muslims, and with the Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum.