

CHILE 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship. The law prohibits religious discrimination and provides civil remedies to victims of discrimination. Religion and state are officially separate. The National Office of Religious Affairs (ONAR), an executive government agency, is charged with facilitating communication between faith communities and the government and ensuring the protection of the rights of religious minorities. ONAR continued to work with local authorities in the communities affected by attacks on churches in several regions of the country, including the Araucania and Santiago Regions, to rebuild the damaged churches. In October, the Secretary General of the Government, Jaime Bellolio, condemned the use of Nazi symbols and gestures displayed during a protest against a referendum on drafting a new constitution. In July, the mayor of the city of Recoleta said there was a “Zionist conspiracy” in the country to control media during a radio interview. The Jewish community and other public representatives condemned the mayor’s accusations. In July, the senate approved a nonbinding pro-BDS (Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions) resolution calling on President Sebastian Pinera to adopt a law boycotting goods from Israeli settlements in the West Bank and commercial activities with companies operating in the West Bank. The Jewish Community of Chile condemned the resolution, stating it was anti-Semitic. According to ONAR and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the nonbinding resolution had no impact on government action. During the year, ONAR held roundtable discussions with religious leaders to address the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the government’s quarantine and movement restrictions on religious communities. Some religious groups opposed the government’s COVID-19 measures, including two associations of evangelical churches, which filed a complaint with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) against the country for violating the freedoms of religion and worship established in the American Convention on Human Rights.

In November, unknown subjects burned an evangelical Christian church in the southern region of Araucania, and several priests and churches in the region reportedly received threats during the year. Jewish community leaders continued to express concern regarding the rise in anti-Semitism in the country, including anti-Semitic signs and chants during marches in October by self-described nationalist groups opposed to a referendum on drafting a new constitution. On October 18, hooded individuals marking the one-year anniversary of civil unrest in

the country set fire to two churches in downtown Santiago. The bell tower of the Church of the Assumption was completely destroyed.

The Charge d’Affaires and other U.S. embassy representatives periodically met with government officials to discuss reports of anti-Semitism, religious minorities’ security concerns, and institutional cooperation among government and religious organizations. They also met with civil society and religious leaders to discuss religious diversity and tolerance and to raise incidents of concern, including perceived threats to the Jewish community. The embassy continued to use social media to underscore the importance of interfaith understanding and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 18.2 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to ONAR’s 2018 estimates, 60 percent of the population self-identifies as Roman Catholic and an estimated 18 percent identifies as “evangelical,” a term used in the country to refer to non-Catholic Christian groups, including Episcopalians, but not The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Orthodox Churches (including the Armenian, Greek, Persian, Serbian, and Ukrainian communities), and Seventh-day Adventists. In the most recent census that included religious affiliation, conducted in 2002, Baha’is, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), the Church of Jesus Christ, the Orthodox Churches, and other unspecified religious groups together constituted less than 5 percent of the population. An estimated 4 percent of the population identifies as atheist or agnostic, while 17 percent of the population identifies as nonreligious. According to ONAR, 9 percent of the population self-identifies as indigenous, of which approximately 30 percent identify as Catholic, 38 percent as evangelical, and 6 percent as other; the remaining 26 percent did not identify with any religion. ONAR states that many of those individuals also incorporate traditional indigenous faith practices into their worship.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the free exercise of worship. It states these practices must not be “opposed to morals, to good customs, or to the public order.” Religious groups may establish and maintain places of

worship, as long as the locations comply with public hygiene and security regulations established by laws and municipal orders.

According to the constitution, religion and state are officially separate. The law prohibits discrimination based on religion, provides civil remedies to victims of discrimination based on their religion or belief, and increases criminal penalties for acts of discriminatory violence. The law prohibits discrimination in the provision of social services, education, ability to practice religious beliefs or gain employment, property rights, and the right to build places of worship.

By law, registration for possible conscription to the military is mandatory for all men between the ages of 17 and 45. Alternative service, by working for the armed forces in a job related to the selectee's expertise, is possible only for those studying in certain fields. The law makes no provision for conscientious objection. Only ministers or priests from registered religious organizations are exempted on religious grounds.

The law does not require religious groups to register with the government, although there are tax benefits for those that do. Once registered, a religious group is recognized as a religious nonprofit organization. Religious organizations have the option of adopting a charter and bylaws suited to a religious entity rather than to a private corporation or a secular nonprofit. Under the law, religious nonprofit organizations may create affiliates, such as charitable foundations, schools, or additional houses of worship, which retain the tax benefits of the religious parent organization. According to ONAR, public law recognizes more than 3,200 religious organizations as legal entities, mostly small evangelical or Pentecostal churches. By law, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) may not refuse to accept the registration petition of a religious entity, although it may object to petitions within 90 days if legal prerequisites for registration are not satisfied.

Applicants for religious nonprofit status must provide the MOJ an authorized copy of their charter and corresponding bylaws with charter members' signatures and their national identification numbers. The bylaws must include the organization's mission, creed, and structure. The charter must specify the signatories, the name of the organization, and its physical address, and it must include confirmation that the religious institution's charter signatories approved the bylaws. In the event the MOJ raises objections to the group, the group may petition; the petitioning group has 60 days to address the MOJ's objections or challenge them in court. Once a religious entity is registered, the state may not dissolve it by decree. If concerns are raised regarding a religious group's activities after registration, the

semiautonomous Council for the Defense of the State may initiate a judicial review of the matter. The government has never deregistered a legally registered group. One registration per religious group is sufficient to extend nonprofit status to affiliates, such as additional places of worship or schools, clubs, or sports organizations, without registering them as separate entities.

By law, all public schools must offer religious education for two teaching hours per week through pre-elementary, elementary, middle, and high school. Local school administrators decide how religious education classes are structured. The majority of religious instruction in public schools is Catholic. The Ministry of Education also has approved instruction curricula designed by 14 other religious groups, including orthodox and reformed Jews, evangelical Christians, and Seventh-day Adventists. Schools must provide religious instruction for students according to students' religious affiliations. Parents may have their children excused from religious education. Parents also have the right to homeschool their children for religious reasons or enroll them in private, religiously oriented schools.

The law grants religious groups the right to appoint chaplains to offer religious services in public hospitals and prisons. Prisoners may request religious accommodations. Regulations for the armed forces and law enforcement agencies allow officially registered religious groups to appoint chaplains to serve in each branch of the armed forces, the national uniformed police, and the national investigative police.

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

Government Practices

During the year, the government implemented health measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including curfews, stay-at-home orders, quarantines, and limits to public gatherings, including religious services. According to ONAR, the restrictions applied to all types of public gatherings and did not impose arbitrary restrictions on individuals' freedom of conscience and worship. ONAR stated it worked with local and national health authorities to obtain authorization for priests and ministers to be included in the definition of "essential personnel" allowed to circulate during quarantines, and it held roundtable discussions with religious leaders to inform them of COVID-19 measures and hear their concerns.

According to church leaders, police shut down some religious services and detained religious leaders who did not comply with the health restrictions on public gatherings and continued holding services exceeding the permitted capacity. Some religious groups opposed the restrictions, stating the measures infringed on their religious freedom. In June, two associations of evangelical churches (Evangelical Unity of Chile and The Coordinator of Pentecostal Evangelical Entities) in the Biobio Region sued the government over the measures and also filed a complaint with the IACHR against the government for violating the freedoms of religion and worship established in the American Convention on Human Rights. In July, the Concepcion Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the evangelical associations, declaring that regional health authorities acted “outside the scope of their competence and without having powers to do so” when they temporarily prohibited religious gatherings in the Maule, Biobio, and Aysen Regions. The court found the regions had applied stricter standards to religious gatherings than to other types of gatherings.

In September, the government released a special protocol for managing and preventing COVID-19 infections at religious places and religious communities when celebrating their rites and ceremonies. The protocol allowed religious groups to return to holding religious activities while recommending they hold virtual meetings, reduce the number of participants as much as possible, and control access to religious sites to avoid exceeding the number of persons allowed concurrently in the same place.

According to ONAR, the MOJ received 240 applications for registration of religious groups during the year. ONAR also reported the MOJ did not reject any petition and registered every group that completed the required paperwork.

In July during a radio interview, Mayor Daniel Jadue of the commune of Recoleta, in Santiago Province, alleged a “Zionist conspiracy” in the country to control the media. The Jewish community and public personalities quickly condemned Jadue’s comments. The director of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Espacio Publico (Public Space), Eduardo Bitran, tweeted that the mayor’s accusation was “in line with the purest kind of anti-Semitism.”

In October, the Secretary General of the Government, Jaime Bellolio, condemned the use of Nazi symbols and gestures displayed during an October 10 protest against a referendum on drafting a new constitution.

ONAR continued to work with religious institutions to help restore services to repair religious sites damaged during widespread riots in 2019. More than 60 Catholic and evangelical churches and at least one synagogue were vandalized, looted, or burned during the riots.

In July, the senate approved a nonbinding pro-BDS resolution calling on President Pinera to adopt a law boycotting goods produced in Israeli West Bank settlements and commercial activities with companies operating in the West Bank. The Jewish Community of Chile condemned the resolution, stating it was anti-Semitic in nature. According to ONAR and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the nonbinding resolution had no impact on government policy.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On October 18, hooded individuals marking the one-year anniversary of civil unrest in the country set fire to two churches in downtown Santiago. The bell tower of the Church of the Assumption was completely destroyed. The unidentified individuals also set fire to parts of the San Francisco de Borja Church, the institutional church of the Carabineros (National Police). Government officials and religious leaders widely condemned the attacks. Catholic Archbishop of Santiago Celestino Aós condemned the attack, stating he had mistakenly thought the damage to multiple churches during civil unrest in 2019 had taught a lesson against the use of violence.

On November 13, unknown individuals burned an evangelical church as part of a series of violent incidents in the southern region of Araucania. Several priests and churches in the region reportedly received threats during the year. ONAR helped the affected churches report the threats to police and pressed for increased police monitoring and patrols of religious buildings in the region. The Mapuche, the country's largest indigenous group, consider most of Araucania as ancestral territory and continued to call for the government to return lands confiscated prior to the return to democracy in the late 1980s. Some factions of the Mapuche continued to use violence, including attacks on facilities and vehicles of industrial producers, such as farms and logging companies, as well as churches and private residences, to demand the return of land.

Jewish community leaders again expressed concern regarding a rise in anti-Semitism in the country. In October, protesters belonging to nationalist groups opposed to a referendum on drafting a new constitution carried anti-Semitic signs and used neo-Nazi symbols and salutes. In response, Marcelo Isaacson, executive

director of the Jewish Community of Chile, the country's umbrella Jewish organization, tweeted, "Germany 1930? No, Chile October 2020. Hate takes over the streets of Chile." Government officials and other religious leaders quickly condemned the acts.

The Chilean Association for Interreligious Dialogue (ADIR), an NGO formed by religious leaders of an official government advisory council on religious affairs after the council disbanded in 2018, continued working during the year, promoting diversity, tolerance, and open dialogue and supporting religious communities' efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Mohamed Rumie, imam of Santiago's largest mosque, took over the presidency of ADIR during the year.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy representatives periodically met with government officials, including ONAR, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Interior Ministry, and congress, to discuss the status of religious minorities in the country and their security concerns, reports of anti-Semitism, and institutional cooperation among government and religious organizations. They also met with civil society and religious leaders to discuss religious diversity and tolerance and to discuss incidents of concern, including perceived threats to the Jewish community.

The embassy highlighted Ramadan, International Religious Freedom Day, and the United Nations' International Day for Tolerance through social media posts encouraging interfaith understanding and religious tolerance.