

CHILE 2021 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) is charged with facilitating communication between faith communities and the government and ensuring the protection of the rights of religious minorities. In response to feedback from the Catholic Bishop's Conference, the government modified March COVID-19 weekend lockdowns and daily restrictions on the size of public gatherings to allow for holding Mass and other religious gatherings, with the maximum numbers of attendees varying by a region's level of COVID-19 infection rates. On June 2, the Chile-Palestine Inter-Parliamentary Group in the Chamber of Deputies (lower house of congress) drafted a bill to boycott goods, services, and products (BDS) from Israeli settlements, which remained under consideration in committee at year's end. The Jewish Community of Chile (CJCH) stated that the draft bill created a hostile environment against members of its community. On June 29, legislators in the Chamber of Deputies passed a resolution rejecting discrimination and "acts of intolerance from authorities and candidates to public office" and calling on then presidential candidate Daniel Jadue to repudiate the antisemitic statements made in the biographical sketch of his school yearbook. President Sebastian Pinera and First Lady Cecilia Morel, several cabinet members, the director of ONAR, and members of the Jewish community celebrated a prayer service (*Tefilah*) on September 23, in observance of the country's national independence month. In his remarks during the service, CJCH President Gerardo Gorodischer requested the government consider adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism. ONAR continued to engage with local authorities in the communities affected by yearly attacks on churches, including in the Araucania and Santiago Regions, to rebuild churches damaged in the attacks. In October, ONAR, in conjunction with Brigham Young University and the Pontifical University of Chile Center for Law and Religion, hosted the First Forum on Human Dignity and Religious Freedom in the Southern Cone.

Churches in Araucania were increasingly targets of arson attacks for the sixth year in a row. Several priests and churches in the region reported receiving arson threats during the year. On October 12, regional media reported that unknown individuals burned a Catholic church and the Nuevo Pacto Pentecostal Church in Araucania, causing President Pinera to declare a state of emergency for the region.

These attacks followed other incidents reported earlier in 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. Jewish community leaders continued to express concern about a rise in antisemitism in the country, which they partly attributed to an escalation of violence between Israel and Hamas in May. During the same month, the Jewish community reported a series of antisemitic comments, threats, and harassment on social media targeting community members. In September, individuals reported graffiti featuring swastikas and SS symbols in the Las Condes Municipality of Santiago Metropolitan Region and near the Hebrew Institute in the city of Santiago. On September 16, a truck driver passed outside the Aish Hatorah Synagogue in the capital city, shouting “Heil Hitler.”

The Charge d’Affaires and U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials to discuss reports of antisemitism, religious minorities’ security concerns, and institutional cooperation between religious organizations and the Chilean government. The embassy engaged members of congress and government officials to underscore U.S. opposition to the draft BDS bill. 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. On October 29, the Charge d’Affaires attended a forum on religious freedom and discussed the importance of religious freedom with event speakers. On September 23, a senior embassy official attended a Tefilah prayer event with the CJCH where he discussed religious freedom issues with forum speakers. 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 18.3 million (midyear 2021). According to ONAR’s 2021 estimates, 70 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 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 (Sunni, Shia, and those who identify with Sufism, among others), 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 constitute 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 do not identify with any religion. ONAR states that many of those individuals also incorporate traditional indigenous faith practices into their worship. Indigenous Mapuche communities primarily identify as Christian, with the majority being Catholic, while an increasing number identify with evangelical Christian groups; others adhere to traditional Mapuche beliefs and syncretism.

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 if 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 parent religious organization. According to ONAR, public law recognizes more than 3,200 religious organizations as legal entities, mostly small evangelical Christian or Pentecostal churches. By law, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) must 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 with 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 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.

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By law, all public schools must offer religious education as an elective class for two teaching hours per week through pre-elementary, elementary, middle, and high school. Local school administrators decide how religious education classes are structured. Most 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 Reform 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 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

In March, the government announced a mandatory lockdown on Santiago and 20 other cities during the weekends in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to media, Bishop of Punta Arenas Bernardo Miguel Bastres, whose Catholic diocese includes the southernmost regions of the country, criticized the measure and called for “civil disobedience,” adding that the local health situation was different from the capital. Bastres said it was also necessary to consider that the national government restrictions did not contribute to the spiritual needs of the faithful. In response to COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference called on the government to engage in a dialogue on freedom of worship and religion. According to media, on March 14, the government modified its COVID-19 restrictions, announcing that Catholic masses and other religious gatherings would be allowed and that the maximum numbers of attendees would vary based on a region’s level of COVID-19 infection rates.

On September 3, Vice Minister of the Secretariat General of the Presidency Maximo Pavez and ONAR Director Jeremias Medina met with religious leaders and announced changes to visitor capacity that allowed 250 participants at indoor religious gatherings (or 1,000 participants if all had a “mobility pass” with proof of COVID-19 vaccination) and 500 participants in outdoor religious gatherings (5,000 if all had a mobility pass). Pavez said, “Freedom of worship is a fundamental right.”

On June 2, the Chile-Palestine Inter-Parliamentary Group in the Chamber of Deputies drafted a BDS bill. Lawmaker Sergio Gahona – one of the bill’s drafters – and other parliamentarians stated that the bill would prevent human rights violations in Israel-occupied territories. Both the CJCH and the Chilean Community of Israel, the latter organization whose members live in Israel, condemned the bill, stating it “creates a clearly hostile environment against the members of the Jewish community in our country, which is reflected in various

forms of aggression and antisemitism, which have increased alarmingly in recent weeks.”

On June 29, the Chamber of Deputies approved a resolution stating its absolute rejection of any types of discrimination and any act of tolerance coming from authorities and candidates for public office. The resolution also called on mayor of Recoleta Municipality and then presidential candidate Daniel Jadue, who is of Palestinian origin, to “publicly and categorically deny the statements made in the biographical sketch of his high school yearbook, which classifies him as antisemitic.” According to media, in the yearbook, Jadue wrote that the best gift they could give him was a “Jew to target.” Jadue did not respond to the resolution. Jadue previously accused Jews of controlling the country’s media and referred to the Jewish community as the “Zionist community.” At year’s end, the draft BDS bill remained under consideration in the Constitution and Legislation Committee of the Chamber of Deputies.

In August, ONAR hosted a virtual symposium entitled, “How Does the State Recognize the Spirituality of Our Native Communities?,” which addressed religious freedom of the country’s indigenous communities. ONAR Director Medina described the symposium as a point of convergence between ancestral spirituality and Chilean society, highlighting ONAR’s efforts to promote religious freedom as a fundamental human right. Speakers included academics and representatives of the Mapuche and Aymara communities.

On September 28, President Pinera and First Lady Morel, along with several cabinet members, the Director of ONAR, and key members of the Jewish community, participated in a Tefilah prayer service in observance of the country’s national independence month. During the service, CJCH President Gorodischer called on congress to draft and pass enhanced legislation to improve protections against hate crimes and to strengthen the antidiscrimination law. He encouraged the government to adopt the IHRA’s working definition of antisemitism. There was no government decision regarding the request to adopt the IHRA’s definition by year’s end.

On September 18, President Pinera and leaders of the legislative and judicial branches attended an ecumenical Thanksgiving service (*Te Deum*) celebrated in observance of the country’s Independence Day. Apostolic Administrator of the Archdiocese of Santiago Monsignor Celestino Aos led the service in the Metropolitan Cathedral.

In September, ONAR and the Social Organizations Division, an agency of the Ministry General Secretariat of Government, jointly conducted in-person training for leaders of religious organizations to provide tools to strengthen engagement between religious institutions and civil society organizations. In September, ONAR also held a nondenominational symposium commemorating the educational and value-shaping contributions that the Bible has had in society, including the role of translation and interpretation. In October, ONAR held several symposia on religious freedom to commemorate Religious Freedom Month. On October 28, it cohosted an event on human dignity and religious freedom with the Argentine Council on Religious Freedom. ONAR designated October 31 as the National Day of Evangelical Churches.

On October 28-29, ONAR cohosted the First Forum on Human Dignity and Religious Freedom in the Southern Cone, with Brigham Young University and the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile Center for Law and Religion, which was open to members of all religious groups. The forum included in-person events in Santiago and virtual access for participants in other countries in the region. The forum's goals included reaffirming the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and reinforcing the principles of religious freedom in the Southern Cone.

ONAR continued to engage 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. ONAR helped the affected churches report threats to police and pressed for increased police monitoring and patrols of religious buildings in the region.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On October 12, unknown individuals burned a Catholic church and the Nuevo Pacto Pentecostal Church in a continuation of violent incidents in the southern region of Araucania. Following the arson attacks, President Pinera declared a state of emergency for the region. In April, arsonists burned a church in the municipality of Padre Las Casas on the road to Huichahue. Media reported that individuals wrote, "Freedom to the prisoners of the Chilean state" on the front of the damaged church. In February, assailants burned the Boroa Mission Church, located in the municipality of Nueva Imperial in Araucania Region. This was the sixth year that such burnings occurred, with an increase in numbers of arson attacks reported during the year.

Several priests and churches in the Araucania Region reportedly received arson threats during the year. ONAR reported that its regional directors were in constant contact with the churches and communities affected by the arson attacks, and it held discussions with governors regarding possible assistance from regional governments. According to academic and nongovernmental sources, the Mapuche, an ethnonym chosen by the group and referring collectively to 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 what they stated was a rise in antisemitism in the country. According to the Antisemitism Cyber Monitoring System, an Israeli government monitoring system that tracks antisemitism worldwide, the significant Palestinian presence in the country influenced public discourse, "which is expressed in distinctly antisemitic tone under the guise of anti-Zionist activity." On May 19, a group of demonstrators burned Israeli flags outside the Israeli embassy in Santiago. In May, the Jewish community reported a series of antisemitic comments and threats posted on social media coinciding with the escalation of violence between Israel and Hamas. On May 12, the Federation of Jewish Students received several antisemitic messages, including, "They are coming, pest murders of Palestinians . . . HAIL HITLER." The CJCH's annual report, "Anti-Jewish Incidents in Chile, 2020-2021," identified several incidents: on August 17, observers saw a poster hanging outside the National Institute of Human Rights with the slogan "From Colombia to Palestine the peoples resist against fascism and criminal Zionism." In September, individuals reported graffiti that featured swastikas and SS symbols in Las Condes Municipality in Santiago Metropolitan Region and near the Hebrew Institute in the city of Santiago. On September 16th, a truck driver shouted "Heil Hitler" when passing the Aish Hatorah Synagogue in Santiago.

During the year, the Chilean Association of Interreligious Dialogue (ADIR Chile), which includes Catholics, Orthodox, Adventists, Anglicans, Baptists, Evangelicals, Lutherans, Church of Jesus Christ, Jews, Muslims, Baha'is, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Brahma Kumaris, and indigenous spiritual traditions, held several events, including an interfaith dialogue about the constitutional process on July 28 and a virtual interfaith Gathering to Celebrate the International Day of Peace on September 21. On October 19, representatives of the Catholic, Orthodox, and

Anglican Churches, National Evangelical Union, National Evangelical Platform, Church of Jesus Christ, Islamic Center of Chile, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and of Jewish and Muslim groups delivered a proposal to members of the country's Constitutional Convention that addressed the importance of religious freedom in a free and democratic country. On December 13, members of ADIR Chile and other religious leaders visited a Mapuche religious center, Ruca Mapuche, in the municipality of La Cisterna as part of a program to foster respect for spiritual and cultural diversity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d' Affaires and other embassy representatives regularly met with government officials, including from ONAR, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Interior Ministry, and members of congress, to discuss the status of religious minorities in the country and their security concerns, reports of antisemitism, and institutional cooperation between government and religious organizations. The embassy engaged members of congress and government officials to underscore U.S. government opposition to the draft BDS bill.

The Charge and other embassy representatives 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. On September 23, a senior embassy official attended a prayer service with the CJCH and discussed religious freedom issues with other attendees. The embassy highlighted Ramadan, International Religious Freedom Day, and the UN International Day for Tolerance through social media posts encouraging interfaith understanding and religious tolerance. On October 29, the Charge d' Affaires attended and discussed the importance of religious freedom at the First Forum on Human Dignity and Religious Freedom in the Southern Cone, sponsored by Brigham Young University's International Center for Law and Religion Studies, ONAR, and the Center for Law and Religion at Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, with participants from Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, and the United States.

The embassy continued to use social media to underscore the importance of interfaith understanding and tolerance.