

HONDURAS 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions. Religious organizations may register as legal entities classified as religious associations and thereby acquire tax-exempt status and other government benefits. On September 30, the Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum (FIH) – an evangelical Protestant umbrella organization – reported government discrimination in the application of tax exoneration policies and residency applications for foreign missionaries. It stated the government did not approve or respond to an application for a tax exemption or for residency permits from certain religious groups associated with the FIH, which does not have a formalized agreement with the government, while approving applications from other religious groups belonging to the Evangelical Fellowship of Honduras (CEH), which has a formalized agreement. Representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church continued to express concerns that some public universities did not grant them leave to observe their Sabbath on Saturday because Saturdays were part of the official work week. They cited specifically the Francisco Morazan National Pedagogical University.

According to Seventh-day Adventists, some private universities and companies did not grant them leave to observe their Sabbath. Muslim leaders reported incidents where individuals who self-identified as evangelical Protestants made offensive remarks regarding their community on social media, such as “stop infesting our country with false doctrines.”

The Charge d’Affaires raised with the Minister of Human Rights the importance of religious freedom as a fundamental right. U.S. embassy officials met with officials of the Ministry of Human Rights, the Ministry of Foreign Relations, and the autonomous National Commission of Human Rights (CONADEH) to discuss issues of religious freedom, including the importance of respect for minority religious groups and for equal treatment under the law for all religious groups. On May 18 and October 15, the Charge d’Affaires met with Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga, who described social challenges, including poverty and migration, and the role of the Catholic Church in helping the population address these challenges. On September 17, the Charge d’Affaires hosted an interfaith roundtable to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. Topics included religious freedom in schools, societal inequality, corruption, the role of religious groups in the November presidential and legislative elections, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Embassy officials continued to engage with religious leaders and other members of

a wide range of religious communities regarding their involvement in addressing societal violence, corruption, inequality, and migration, and their concerns regarding what they viewed as the government's preferential treatment of some religious groups over others in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.3 million (midyear 2021). According to a CID Gallup poll released in 2020, 48 percent of the population identifies as evangelical Protestant and 34 percent as Roman Catholic. Other religious groups, each representing less than 5 percent of the population, include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Episcopalians, Lutherans, the Antiochian Orthodox Apostolic Catholic Church, Muslims, Jews, Baha'is, the 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. Several 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 and Afro-descendent groups 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 Seventh-day Adventist Association, there are 79,518 members. The Jehovah's Witnesses community states it has 23,016 members. The Muslim community states it has 2,695 members, mostly Sunni; approximately 90 percent are converts. The Antioquia Orthodox Apostolic Catholic community has approximately 5,000 members. The Baha'i Faith community counts 1,031 members. The Jewish community estimates it has 275 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. The constitution prohibits religious leaders from holding public office or making political statements.

Religious organizations may register as legal entities classified as religious associations. Organizations seeking status as a legal entity must apply to the Ministry of Governance, Justice, and Decentralization and provide information on their internal organization, bylaws, and goals. 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 do not receive tax-exempt status. The official NGO and religious organization registry office – the Directorate of Regulation, Registration, and Monitoring of Civil Associations (DIRRSAC) – is located within the Ministry of Governance, Justice, and Decentralization.

The law criminalizes discrimination based on religion and includes crimes committed against individuals because of their religion as aggravating circumstances that may increase penalties for criminal offenses.

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, including the Roman Catholic Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and evangelical Protestant churches, operate schools. 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 of all students, regardless of religious affiliation, in religious studies classes or 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, including for religious reasons.

The government requires foreign missionaries to obtain entry and residence permits and mandates that a local institution or individual must 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 agreement 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. According to 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 by the court or the Attorney General’s Office to testify regarding 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 must guarantee the free exercise of religion without preference for one specific religion, as long as the kind of worship is not against the law or public order. Prisoners have access to religious counseling from leaders of their faith.

While the government authorizes clergy from all religious groups to conduct marriage ceremonies, by law it recognizes only civil marriages conducted with a lawyer authorized to perform marriage ceremonies.

The official work week is Monday to Saturday, with no exceptions for religious groups that celebrate Friday or Saturday as their Sabbath.

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

Government Practices

In advance of the November 28 general elections, some religious groups issued public statements encouraging their followers to peacefully participate in the electoral process. In addition, some religious organizations, such as the Catholic humanitarian organization Caritas and the Association for a More Just Society (a Christian nongovernmental organization [NGO]), participated as civil society election observers during the voting and vote count process.

During the year, the DIRRSAC registered 151 religious associations of a total of 208 applications, compared with a total of 86 applications and 66 registered associations in 2020. According to the DIRRSAC, it did not deny any registration requests by religious associations during the year, and 57 applications continued to be under review through year's end.

Representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church continued to express concerns that some schools and other public and private institutions did not grant them leave to observe their Sabbath on Saturday because Saturdays were part of the official work week. They cited specifically the public Francisco Morazan National Pedagogical University and the Catholic University of Honduras in La Ceiba. They said the Supreme Court had ruled favorably in 2019 on a constitutional challenge that Seventh-day Adventist students filed in 2015 seeking alternatives to taking classes or exams on Saturdays, but these two universities did not uphold that ruling, nor did the government enforce it. Reportedly, students at both universities requested the institutions comply with the Supreme Court's ruling. Other students said they decided not to pursue further recourse due to fear of additional discrimination and retaliation from their professors, or they opted to withdraw from the university.

Some religious organizations, including the evangelical Protestant umbrella organization FIH, which states that 40 religious groups are members and does not have a formalized agreement with the government, said the government continued to give preference to religious groups belonging to the evangelical Protestant umbrella organization CEH, which states its membership includes 360 religious groups. On September 30, the FIH said the government discriminated against its members in the application of residency permits and a request for tax exemption. The FIH said the government did not approve or respond to an application for tax exemption for the construction of a religious building or applications for residence permits for its foreign missionaries, while approving similar applications from the CEH, which has an agreement with the government.

At year's end, CONADEH reported it had not received any complaints of religious discrimination or restrictions on religious freedom.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslim community representatives said they continued to receive derogatory messages on social media from members of the evangelical Protestant community, such as "stop infesting our country with false doctrines."

The FIH reported one of its member churches received negative messages on social media after a pastor died in September of COVID-19. The messages stated the pastor's death was a punishment from God because the pastor had made public statements discouraging individuals from getting vaccinated.

Seventh-day Adventists reported the continued refusal of certain private institutions, including places of employment and schools, to permit them to observe Saturday as their Sabbath. They cited several factories in the department of Cortes and the Catholic University of Honduras in La Ceiba.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d'Affaires raised with the Minister of Human Rights the importance of religious freedom as a fundamental right and equal treatment under the law for religious groups. Embassy officials met with officials of the Ministry of Human Rights, the Ministry of Foreign Relations, and CONADEH to discuss issues of religious freedom, including the importance of respect for minority religious groups and for equal treatment under the law for all religious groups.

Embassy officials continued discussions with religious leaders and members of religious communities, including Roman Catholics, CEH, FIH, Orthodox Christians, Seventh-day Adventists, and Muslims, regarding societal violence, poverty, and the COVID-19 pandemic. The Seventh-day Adventist representative also raised the issue of school and work commitments interfering with their observation of the Sabbath on Saturdays. On May 18 and October 15, the Charge d'Affaires met with Cardinal Rodriguez Maradiaga to discuss religious freedom, tolerance, and social challenges including violence, migration, and corruption, and the role of the Catholic Church in helping the population address these challenges.

On September 17, the Charge d'Affaires hosted an interfaith roundtable with religious leaders from the evangelical Protestant, Seventh-day Adventist, Muslim, and Baha'i Faith communities to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. Participants also discussed the Adventists' continuing difficulties with schools and other private and public institutions that did not grant leave to Seventh-day Adventist students or employees to observe Saturday as their Sabbath and bureaucratic challenges other groups faced, such as updating missionary visa agreements. In addition, participants exchanged ideas on how religious groups addressed societal inequality, corruption, the role of religious groups in the November presidential and legislative elections, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

The embassy amplified local engagement and U.S. State Department leadership messaging on religious freedom topics through the embassy's social media platforms. This included a tweet on the embassy's interfaith roundtable that highlighted the U.S. government's commitment to supporting international religious freedom and other human rights.