

HONDURAS 2022 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 July 25, the Roman Catholic Church and the Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum (FIH) – an evangelical Protestant umbrella organization – reported government discrimination in the processing of residency applications for foreign missionaries. The FIH continued to state the government did not approve or respond to an application for tax exemption or for residency permits from certain religious groups associated with the FIH, which does not have a formalized agreement with the government. 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. Muslim leaders reported difficulties in observing Friday prayers because Friday is a workday.

The Catholic Church reported the killing of Father José Enrique Vásquez Cálix on March 2. On March 23, the court sentenced two suspects to pretrial detention while they awaited trial for Vásquez's killing. According to Church officials, during the year, a group stating it was acting on behalf of the ruling LIBRE party attempted to burn one church and defaced several churches with graffiti. According to Catholic Church officials, some LIBRE party supporters targeted the Church because they believed it had supported the 2009 coup that ousted former President and LIBRE party leader José Manuel Zelaya. According to the Seventh-day Adventists, some private universities and companies did not grant them leave to observe their Sabbath. Muslim leaders said there was an increase in incidents in which individuals who self-identified as evangelical Protestants made offensive remarks regarding their community and threatened violence against them and their places of worship.

The U.S. Ambassador raised with the Minister of Human Rights on several occasions 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. On multiple occasions throughout the year, the Ambassador met with Cardinal Óscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga, who described the impact of political polarization on religious freedom. In July, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith roundtable to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy officials engaged with religious leaders and other members of a wide range of religious communities, including through an interfaith roundtable held in October in San Pedro Sula, where they discussed the groups' views on government treatment of religious groups and their involvement in addressing societal violence, corruption, inequality, and migration.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.5 million (midyear 2022). According to a CID Gallup poll released in 2020, 48 percent of the population identifies as evangelical Protestant and 34 percent as Roman Catholic. Catholic Church officials, however, state that 75 percent of the population is 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 77,812 members. The Jehovah's Witnesses community states it has 22,912 members. The Church of Jesus Christ states it has 184,160 members. The Muslim community states it has 6,980 members, mostly Sunni; approximately 99 percent are converts. The Antioquia Orthodox Apostolic Catholic community has

approximately 5,000 members. The Baha'i Faith community counts 1,032 members. The Jewish community estimates it has 150 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 nongovernmental 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 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 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 Evangelical Fellowship of Honduras (CEH), 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 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, so 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

During the year, the DIRRSAC registered 54 religious associations of a total of 159 applications, compared with 151 associations registered and 208 applications in 2021. According to the DIRRSAC, it did not deny any registration requests by religious associations during the year, and 105 applications continued to be under review through year's end.

Representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church continued to express concern that some schools, including the Francisco Morazán National Pedological University, and other public institutions did not grant them leave to observe their Sabbath on Saturday because Saturdays were part of the official work week. 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 certain universities did not uphold that ruling, nor did the government enforce it.

Catholic representatives noted concerns with the issuance of new entry and residency permits for foreign missionaries seeking to stay in the country for longer than six months and delays in processing application requests for tax exemption. Representatives of the Orthodox Church and the Church of Jesus Christ also said they experienced problems with the processing and issuance of residency permits for long-term missionaries.

The FIH continued to state 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.

A Muslim representative said his community faced difficulties in holding Friday prayers. The representative said he encouraged his community to comply with the country's laws and social norms, including treating Friday as a workday, while

encouraging members of the community to gather for prayer and a shared meal during lunch hour on Fridays.

On July 14, presidential designee Salvador Nasralla attended the inauguration of the first Orthodox Jewish synagogue in the country. In his remarks, Nasralla stated, "It is an honor to show the plurality we have. Regardless of not professing the Jewish religion, we know how to respect all religions."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Catholic Church reported the killing of Father Vásquez Cálix on March 2 in Morazán, Yoro Department. In the same month, the Prosecutor's Office charged Jorge Martín Guzmán Maldonado and Nelson Ariel Lara Pineda with murder and aggravated assault in the death of Vásquez. Their trial continued through year's end at the Criminal Court of El Progreso, Yoro Department. According to media reports, it was unclear whether the crime was religiously motivated.

Representatives of the Catholic Church stated that although the church did not participate in the 2009 coup that ousted former LIBRE-affiliated President Zelaya, lingering social resentment by Zelaya supporters against the church continued due to perceived church support for the coup. They said the resentment was reflected in negative social media messages in response to Episcopal Conference of Honduras' statements or messages that did not align with political ideologies of the ruling LIBRE Party. According to Catholic Church officials, a group stating it supported the LIBRE party also retaliated against the church by defacing churches with graffiti during protests on multiple occasions, and on June 6, supporters attempted to set fire to the main door of the Iglesia Santa María de los Dolores in Tegucigalpa. Additionally, Catholic officials stated an unknown individual threatened a church spokesperson by attempting to run him over while following him to his residence.

Muslim community representatives reported an increase in incidents in which members of the evangelical Protestant community posted derogatory messages on social media and made various threats, including to cause physical harm to members and to set fire to places of worship. The representatives said they had increased security measures at their places of worship because they feared the threats could materialize into actions against them.

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.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Ambassador raised with the Minister of Human Rights and other government officials 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.

On July 25, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith roundtable with religious leaders from the evangelical Protestant, Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, Muslim, Church of Jesus Christ, and Baha'i Faith communities to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. Participants also discussed the Seventh-day 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 discussed how the disintegration of families contributed to irregular migration to the United States and the role of religious communities in supporting families. They exchanged ideas on how religious groups addressed societal inequality and corruption.

Embassy officials continued discussions with religious leaders and members of religious communities. In October, they hosted an interfaith roundtable in San Pedro Sula with Catholic, CEH, FIH, Orthodox Christian, Seventh-day Adventist, and Muslim representatives. The roundtable focused on these groups' views on government treatment of religious groups and the role of religious groups in addressing societal violence, corruption, inequality, and migration.

On multiple occasions throughout the year, the Ambassador met with Cardinal Rodríguez 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.

The embassy amplified local engagement and Department of State leadership messaging on religious freedom topics through the embassy's social media platforms and website. This included a tweet about the embassy's interfaith roundtable, emphasizing the U.S. government's commitment to supporting international religious freedom and other human rights. Messaging also included social media content highlighting the Ambassador's meetings with religious leaders. The embassy used social media and the embassy's website to frame religious freedom as a fundamental right.