

# COLOMBIA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the right to profess one's religious beliefs. It prohibits discrimination based on religion. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) is responsible for legally recognizing churches, religious denominations, religious federations and confederations, and associations of religious ministers, among other responsibilities. According to religious groups, individuals had difficulty obtaining exemptions from military service on religious grounds. A 2014 ruling by the constitutional court required the military to respond within 15 business days to requests for waiver of military service for reasons of conscientious objection. The Evangelical Council of Colombia reported that as of the end of the year, the military had not responded to two requests for conscientious objector status made in June and August by members of Christian churches.

The attorney general's office reported six religiously based killings this year. Two killings were reported in Meta Department, and one each in the departments of Antioquia, Cordoba, Narino, and Sucre. The attorney general also cited 11 official ongoing investigations for religiously motivated crimes: six related to threats, one for attempted murder, three for personal injury, and one for forced displacement. In some areas of the country, illegal armed groups, including the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the National Liberation Army (ELN), and organized crime groups killed or threatened leaders and members of religious groups, and targeted them for extortion. These actions often disrupted the activities of religious groups working on behalf of vulnerable populations. The Jewish Community reported continued comments promoting anti-Semitism on some social media sites. During the year, religious groups conducted a range of programs focused on restorative justice, reintegration of former combatants, and reconciliation.

U.S. embassy officials discussed issues of religious freedom, such as conscientious objection to military service, with the government and civil society. U.S. embassy officials met periodically with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Attorney General's Office, and the MOI, as well as with representatives from a wide range of religious groups, including the Jewish community, Catholics, evangelicals, Baptists, and Mennonites, to discuss issues related to initiatives to promote freedom of religion and of association, institutionalized discrimination and conscientious objection, peace and tolerance.

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### Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 46.7 million (July 2015 estimate). The Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference estimates 83 percent of the population is Catholic. The Colombian Evangelical Council (CEDECOL) reports 15 percent of the population is Protestant. In a November 2014 study the Pew Research Center found 79 percent of the population was Catholic, 13 percent Protestant, and 6 percent was atheist and agnostic. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population included nondenominational worshipers or members of other religious groups, including Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Other observers estimate the non-Catholic population consists of five million Protestants, including evangelicals; 261,000 Seventh-day Adventists; 150,000 Mormons; 10,000 Muslims; and 5,000 Jews. There is also a small population of adherents to animism and various syncretistic beliefs.

Some religious groups are concentrated in certain geographical regions. Most of those who blend Catholicism with elements of African animism are African Colombians and reside on the Pacific coast. Most Jews reside in major cities, most Muslims on the Caribbean coast, and most adherents of indigenous animistic religions in remote rural areas. A small Taoist commune is located in a mountainous region of Santander Department.

### Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

#### Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the right to profess one's religious beliefs. It prohibits discrimination based on religion. There is no official church or religion, but the law says the state "is not atheist or agnostic, nor indifferent to Colombians' religious sentiment." A concordat between the Vatican and the government, made law, recognizes marriages performed within the Catholic Church, allows the Church to provide chaplaincy services, and prohibits members of the clergy from being compelled into public service, including service in the military. The law prohibits any official government reference to a religious characterization of the country.

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The MOI is responsible for legally recognizing churches, religious denominations, religious federations and confederations, and associations of religious ministers, and keeping a public registry of religious entities. Entities legally recognized by the MOI can then confer legal recognition, called “extended public recognition,” to affiliated groups sharing the same beliefs. The application process requires submission of a formal request and basic organizational information, including copies of an act of constitution and an estimation of the number of members to obtain legal recognition. The government considers a religious group’s total membership, its degree of acceptance within society, and other factors, such as the organization’s statutes and its required behavioral norms, when deciding whether to permit the religious group legal recognition. The MOI is authorized to reject requests that do not fully comply with established requirements or requests that are incomplete. In August the MOI launched a free web-based registration process for religious and faith-based organizations seeking recognition.

The state recognizes as legally binding religious marriages performed by the Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and the 13 religious groups that are signatories to the 1997 public law agreement. This agreement enabled non-Catholic religious groups to engage in a number of activities previously restricted to the Catholic Church. Under this agreement members of groups that are neither signatories to the agreement nor affiliates must marry in a civil ceremony for the state to recognize the marriage. Non-Catholic religious groups seeking to provide chaplaincy services and conduct state-recognized marriages must also solicit formal state recognition from the MOI.

The constitution recognizes the right of parents to choose the education their child receives, including religious instruction. No religious component exists in the public school curriculum. Religious groups, including those that have not acceded to the public law agreement, can establish their own schools, provided they comply with Ministry of Education requirements. A constitutional court ruling obligates schools to implement alternative accommodations for students based on their religion.

An antidiscrimination law imposes a penalty of one to three years in prison and a fine of approximately 5.3 million to eight million Colombian pesos (COP) (\$1,670 to \$2,520) for violations, including discrimination based on religion. The penal code contains a chapter against discrimination that includes religious belief.

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A constitutional court ruling states citizens, including members of indigenous communities, may be exempt from compulsory military service if they can demonstrate a serious and permanent commitment to religious principles that prohibit the use of force. Conscientious objectors who are exempt from military service are required to complete alternative, government-selected public service.

Foreign missionaries must possess a special visa, valid for up to two years. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs issues visas to foreign missionaries and religious group administrators who are members of religious organizations legally recognized and registered with the MOI. Foreign missionaries must have a certificate from either the MOI or church authorities confirming their religious group is registered with the ministry when they apply for the visa. Alternatively, they may produce a certificate issued by a registered religious group confirming the applicant's membership and mission in the country. The visa application also requires a letter issued by a legal representative of the religious group stating the organization accepts full financial responsibility for the expenses of the applicant and family, including funds for return to their country of origin or last country of residence. Applicants must explain the purpose of the proposed sojourn and provide proof of economic means. A Supreme Court ruling stipulates that no group may force religious conversion on members of indigenous communities.

### **Government Practices**

As of the end of the year, the Attorney General's office reported six religiously based killings. Two homicides were reported in Meta Department, and one each in the departments of Antioquia, Cordoba, Nariño, and Sucre. The Attorney General also cited 11 official ongoing investigations for religiously motivated crimes: six related to threats, one for attempted murder, three for personal injury, and one for forced displacement. No convictions were reported.

The MOI reported it routinely granted legal recognition to religious entities. As of the end of the year, the MOI received 1,455 religious organizations' applications for legal recognition of religious entities, approved 455 of those applications, and denied 88 applications due to failure to comply with regulatory requirements. Remaining applications were under review or incomplete and awaiting additional information to be provided by applicants by the end of the calendar year. Applicants who submitted incomplete applications or incorrect supporting documents were given 30 days to bring their applications into compliance. If an application was deemed incomplete, the MOI could deny the application; however,

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the applying organization was able to resubmit an application at any time. There was no waiting period to reapply. No applications were rejected for other reasons.

The Traditional Episcopal Church and International Ministerial Church of Jesus Christ filed petitions to accede to the 1997 public law agreement enabling religious groups to provide chaplaincy services and perform marriages. As of December the disposition of the petitions had not been decided.

The Jewish community reported notaries began for the first time to recognize Jewish wedding ceremonies without the need for a “legal ceremony” in a civil court to officially recognize the marriage.

According to religious groups, individuals had difficulty obtaining exemptions from military service on religious grounds. A 2014 ruling by the constitutional court required the military to respond within 15 business days to requests for waiver of military service for reasons of conscientious objection. The Evangelical Council of Colombia reported that as of the end of the year, the military had not responded to two requests for conscientious objector status made in June and August by members of Christian churches. A religious studies institute student requested conscientious objector status but was instead granted a deferral until he completed his education.

An article was added to the National Development Plan in May requiring the MOI to develop a public policy on freedom of religion. The article requires the MOI to work with religious groups to develop the policy that would guarantee freedom of religion and equal treatment among religious groups. In one example of outreach as part of the policy formation process, the MOI held a meeting on October 8 with religious groups in Cali to discuss the needs of faith-based organizations in the area.

### **Abuses by Rebel or Foreign Forces and Non-State Actors**

Guerrillas, illegal armed groups, and organized crime groups threatened leaders and members of religious groups and targeted them for extortion. This impeded the ability of the religious groups to advocate on behalf of displaced populations and other vulnerable groups or help vulnerable groups with their land claims. Witness for Peace reported on October 15, Presbyterian Pastor German Zarate of Barranquilla and Pastor Walter Villalba of the Association of Evangelical Churches of the Caribbean received death threats communicated by letter from an

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illegal armed group calling itself the Black Eagles. Pastor Zarate received a similar threat in January as well. On November 5, unidentified armed men entered the offices of Prison Fellowship International in Medellin and stole six computers with information on the group's clients.

Protestant leaders stated that isolation and fear of retribution in rural communities led to underreporting of clergy assault, harassment, and killings. Some religious leaders reported they chose not to report cases formally to law enforcement or seek government protection in the form of personal security, bulletproof vests, or cell phones provided by the National Protection Unit because of pacifist beliefs and fear of retribution by terrorist groups.

The Mennonite Association for Justice, Peace and Nonviolent Action (Justapaz) continued to report threats from terrorist groups and criminal bands and forced displacement of clergy and parishioners of the Baptist Church, Presbyterian Church, Anglican Church, Mennonite Church, Four Square Church, ELAM Independent Christian Church, Inter-American Church, and Association of Caribbean Evangelical Churches in Cordoba. As of the end of the year, the Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law Directorate of the Attorney General's Office reported 11 ongoing investigations of religious leaders threatened or harmed as a result of their religious affiliations.

Witness for Peace reported guerillas and illegal armed groups threatened, displaced, or attacked religious leaders for opposing the forced recruitment of minors, promoting human rights, assisting internally displaced persons, assisting with land restitution claims, and discouraging coca cultivation.

Religious groups reported armed groups further restricted religious freedom by limiting freedom of movement and preventing people from attending religious services. In some areas, armed groups limited the time of day that religious or other groups could meet and occasionally prohibited worship and other religious activities.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

The Jewish community reported continued comments promoting hatred of Jews on some social media sites. The community reported the use of excerpts from Protocols of the Elders of Zion, vindication of Hitler, or the denial of the Holocaust

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by social media users. The community also reported one case of vandalism to a menorah statue in Bogota.

A number of faith-based and interfaith NGOs promoted religious freedom and tolerance through their programs and community engagements.

CEDECOL, Justapaz, and the Colombian Confederation of Jewish Communities advocated on behalf of conscientious objectors, documented cases of religious intolerance, and participated in various interfaith dialogues that encouraged religious tolerance.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials discussed issues of religious freedom, such as conscientious objection to military service, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Attorney General's Office, and the MOI.

Embassy representatives maintained regular communication with representatives of the Catholic Church and other religious groups. In Bogota, and on official travel within the country, embassy officials met with local leaders of the Jewish community and the Catholic, Presbyterian, Mennonite, and other churches to discuss issues affecting their communities, including religious freedom and tolerance. As a result of the country's long internal conflict, local leaders continued to focus much of their efforts to ensuring the safety of their religious community from illegal armed groups. Embassy representatives discussed religious freedom issues during working group sessions attended by government representatives, civil society, and religious leaders that emphasized the importance of continued interfaith dialogue and coordination with government partners as the country approached an end to the conflict.