

EL SALVADOR 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and states that all are equal before the law. Discrimination on the basis of religions is prohibited. The constitution grants official recognition to the Catholic Church and states that other religious groups may also apply for official recognition.

Widespread violence and territorial control by rival gangs hindered parishioners from being able to attend religious services in some areas of the country. Leaders of the Catholic Church and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) reported that some parishioners feared crossing gang lines to reach their congregation would result in injury or death.

U.S. embassy officials met with government officials and religious leaders to discuss and promote religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.1 million (July 2015 estimate). According to a May survey by the University of Central America's Institute of Public Opinion, approximately 45.7 percent of the population identifies as Roman Catholic, 34 percent as Protestant, 16.5 percent have no religious affiliation, and 2.8 percent state "other." Groups that together constitute less than 3 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishnas), Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and Mormons. A small segment of the population adheres to indigenous religious beliefs, with some mixing of these beliefs with other religions such as Catholicism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the free exercise of religion. It states all persons are equal before the law and prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The Penal Code imposes criminal sentences of six months to two years on individuals who publicly offend or insult the religious beliefs of others, or damage

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or destroy religious objects. If such acts are carried out for the purpose of gaining media attention, sentences increase to one to three years. Repeat offenders face prison sentences of three to eight years. There have been no prosecutions under this law.

The constitution states that members of the clergy may not occupy positions of president, cabinet ministers, vice ministers, Supreme Court justices, judges, governors, attorney general, public defender, and other senior government positions. The clergy also may not belong to political parties. The electoral code requires judges of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal and members of municipal councils to be laypersons.

The constitution grants official recognition to the Catholic Church and allows other religious groups to apply for official recognition by registering with the government. The law grants tax-exempt status to all officially recognized religious groups and exempts donations to officially recognized groups from taxation. To obtain official recognition, a religious group must apply through the Office of the Director General for Nonprofit Associations and Foundations (DGFASFL) within the Ministry of Governance. The group must present its constitution and bylaws describing the type of organization, location of its offices, its goals and principles, requirements for membership, function of its ruling bodies, and assessments or dues. DGFASFL analyzes the group's constitution and bylaws to ensure they are in compliance with applicable law. Upon approval, the group's constitution and bylaws are published in the official gazette. DGFASFL does not maintain records on religious groups once it approves their status. Although religious groups may operate without registering with the government, registration provides tax-exempt status and facilitates activities requiring official permits, such as building places of worship.

By law, the Ministry of Governance has authority to register, regulate, and oversee the finances of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), non-Catholic churches, and other religious groups.

The law specifically exempts the Catholic Church from registration requirements.

Foreign religious groups must obtain special residence visas for religious activities and may not proselytize while on visitor or tourist visas.

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Public education is secular. The constitution grants the right to establish private schools and private religious schools, which operate without government support. Parents choose whether their children receive religious education. Public schools may not deny admittance to any student based on religion. All private schools, whether religious or not, must meet the same standards to obtain Ministry of Education approval.

Government Practices

There were 149 new requests for registration of religious groups, of which 34 were approved, 111 were pending, one was withdrawn, and none were denied.

The Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights reported it had not received notice of any cases of alleged violations of religious freedom since 2010.

The Legislative Assembly voted against a proposal to add a Bible study class into the public education curriculum.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Catholic and Mormon Church leaders reported that members of their churches could not reach their respective congregations out of fear they would be killed by rival gang members when entering into gang-controlled territory. Religious leaders joined other members of civil society in the government-led National Security Council, helping to develop a new security plan, Plan El Salvador Seguro.

Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, evangelical, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist leaders participated in the Council of Religions for Peace to discuss potential collaborative efforts on violence prevention against children.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the ombudsman for human rights.

An embassy officer discussed religious freedom in the indigenous community with the national director for indigenous people and cultural diversity at the Secretariat of Culture. An embassy officer reviewed the registration process for religious groups with DGFASFL.

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Embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the faith-based NGO Cristosal, a representative for the Mormons, the Catholic archbishop, the Lutheran Church, a representative for the Jewish community in San Salvador, and several evangelical representatives.