

# MEXICO 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees all persons religious freedom, including the right to engage in religious ceremonies and acts of worship. The General Directorate for Religious Associations (DGAR) within the Interior Ministry, which is also known as the Secretariat of Governance or SEGOB, worked with state and local officials on criminal investigations involving religious groups. As of the end of the year, the DGAR had investigated three cases from the state of Chiapas related to religious freedom at the federal level, compared with six in 2016. Government officials stated many of the killings of and attacks on Catholic priests reflected high levels of generalized criminal violence throughout the country rather than targeting for religious beliefs. Some evangelical Protestant groups in remote indigenous areas reported abuse and discrimination by other members of the community and said local governments did not effectively intervene to assist them. According to some legal experts and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), laws intended to provide indigenous communities with autonomy to exercise traditional law had given local authorities the ability to harass some members of minority religious groups or force them to follow the majority religion in the area. Some members of minority religious groups in indigenous communities stated local authorities denied them public benefits and utility services due to their religious affiliation. According to the DGAR, most incidents of religious discrimination occurred under the jurisdiction of the state rather than the federal government.

The Catholic Multimedia Center (CMC) reported that criminal groups continued to target priests and other religious leaders in some parts of the country, including through killings, kidnappings, death threats, and extortion. The CMC reported criminal groups killed four priests and attempted to kidnap two other priests. On July 25, suspected criminal groups detonated an explosive device in front of the Mexican Episcopal Conference's office in Mexico City. In August the CMC called Mexico the most violent country for priests in Latin America for the ninth year in a row. NGOs stated some priests were targeted because of their advocacy on human rights issues. Some evangelical Protestant groups said local community leaders pressured some Protestants in mainly rural and/or indigenous areas in Chiapas and Oaxaca States to participate in Catholic cultural-religious festivities. They said there had been instances in which those refusing to participate in the festivities, or in some cases to convert to Catholicism, faced forcible displacement from their communities, experienced arbitrary detention by local authorities, or had property destroyed by community leaders. Jewish community representatives

reported low levels of anti-Semitic acts and good interreligious cooperation both from the government and civil society organizations in addressing those acts.

U.S. embassy and consulate representatives met with government counterparts to discuss concerns about violence toward Catholic priests and other religious leaders as well as reports of discrimination toward religious minorities, especially evangelical Protestants, in some communities. Embassy officials met with members of religious groups and NGOs to gather details about specific cases. During the annual U.S.-Mexico Human Rights Dialogue in December, U.S. government officials underscored the importance of protecting religious leaders.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 124.6 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2010 census, approximately 83 percent identifies as Roman Catholic and 5 percent as evangelical Protestant. Other religious groups, including Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Muslims, together constitute less than 5 percent of the population. More than 2 percent of the population reports practicing a religion not otherwise specified, and nearly 5 percent reports not practicing any religion. Some indigenous persons adhere to syncretic religions drawing from pre-Hispanic indigenous beliefs.

Official statistics based on self-identification during the 2010 census sometimes differ from the membership figures stated by religious groups. Approximately 315,000 individuals identify themselves as Mormons in the 2010 census. Mormon officials, however, report their membership at approximately 1.3 million. There are large Protestant communities in the southern states of Chiapas and Tabasco. In Chiapas, evangelical Protestant leaders state nearly half of the state's 2.4 million inhabitants are members of evangelical groups, but fewer than 5 percent of 2010 census respondents in Chiapas self-identify as evangelical Protestant.

According to the 2010 census, the Jewish community totals approximately 67,500 persons, of which nearly 42,000 live in Mexico City and the state of Mexico. Nearly half of the country's approximately 4,000 Muslims are concentrated in Mexico City and the state of Mexico. There is also a small Ahmadi Muslim population of several hundred living in Chiapas, most of whom are converts and of ethnic Tzotzil Maya origin. There are also small indigenous communities of Bahai that number in the hundreds. An estimated half of the approximately 100,000 Mennonites are concentrated in the state of Chihuahua.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states all persons are free to profess their chosen religious beliefs and to engage in ceremonies and acts of worship that do not constitute a crime or offense punishable by law. Congress may not enact laws establishing or prohibiting any religion. The constitution defines the country as secular and provides for the separation of religion and state. It prohibits any form of discrimination, including on the basis of religion.

To establish a religious association, applicants must certify that the church or religious group observes, practices, propagates, or instructs a religious doctrine or body of religious beliefs; has conducted religious activities in the country for at least five years; has established domicile in the country; and shows sufficient assets to achieve its purpose. Registered associations may freely organize their internal structures and adopt bylaws or rules pertaining to their governance and operations, including the training and appointment of their clergy. They may engage in public worship and celebrate acts for the fulfillment of the association's purpose, lawfully and without profit. They may propagate their doctrine within applicable regulations and participate in the creation, management, maintenance, and operation of private welfare, educational, and health institutions, provided the institutions are not for profit.

To operate, religious groups are not required to register with the government. Registration is required with the DGAR, however, to negotiate contracts, purchase or rent land, apply for official building permits, receive tax exemptions, or hold religious meetings outside customary places of worship. Religious associations must notify the government of their intention to hold a religious meeting outside their licensed place or places of worship. Religious associations may not hold political meetings of any kind.

The federal government coordinates religious affairs through SEGOB. Within SEGOB, the DGAR promotes religious tolerance, conducts conflict mediation, and investigates cases of religious intolerance. The National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) is an autonomous federal agency responsible for ensuring nondiscrimination and equal opportunity rights, including for minority religious groups. If a party presents a dispute based on allegations of religious intolerance, the DGAR is mandated to mediate a solution. If mediation fails, the

parties may submit the issue to the DGAR for binding arbitration or seek judicial redress. Each of the 32 states has offices with responsibility over religious affairs.

As of October 27, there were 8,908 religious associations registered by the DGAR. These included 8,869 Christian (an increase of 171 from 2016), 13 Buddhist, 10 Jewish, two Hindu, three Islamic, and two International Society for Krishna Consciousness groups. Bahais and Ahmadi Muslims were not officially registered.

The constitution states acts of public worship are to be performed inside places of worship. Active clergy are forbidden from holding public office, advocating partisan political views, supporting political candidates, or publicly opposing the laws or institutions of the state.

The law declares that prisoners “shall enjoy all the rights provided by the constitution and international treaties to which the state is party, provided that these have not been restricted by resolution or judgement, or their exercise is incompatible with the object of these.” Prisoners are legally guaranteed dignified and equal treatment from prison staff without distinction based on religious preferences.

Religious groups must apply for permits to construct new buildings or to convert existing buildings into houses of worship. Any religious building constructed after January 27, 1992 is the property of the religious group that built it and is subject to the relevant taxes. All religious buildings erected before then are considered part of the national patrimony and owned by the state.

The constitution requires public education be secular and not include religious doctrine. Religious groups are permitted to operate private schools and to teach religion and hold religious ceremonies at their schools. Private schools affiliated with a religious group are open to all students regardless of their religious belief or nonbelief; students in these schools are exempt from participating in religious courses and activities if they are not affiliated with the school’s religious group. Homeschooling is allowed at the secondary level after completion of schooling at an accredited primary school.

A visa category exists for foreign ministers of worship and religious associates to obtain a temporary resident visa or visitor visa without permission to perform paid religious activities.

The law states religious groups may not own nor operate radio or television stations. Government permission is required for commercial radio or television to transmit religious programming.

According to the constitution, indigenous communities have the right to autonomy and may “decide their internal forms of coexistence” and have separate legal systems to “regulate and solve their internal conflicts.” The constitution also protects the right of indigenous leaders to practice their own particular “uses and customs.” These rights sometimes conflict with the general principles and fundamental rights provided by the constitution, including freedom of religion.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The country claims the following constitutional limitations to the covenant: a limitation (to Article 18) that religious acts must be performed in places of worship unless granted prior permission and a reservation (to Article 25) that religious ministers have neither a passive vote nor the right to form political associations. Professional education for ministers is not officially recognized.

### **Government Practices**

Some evangelical groups said they did not believe the government responded adequately to their reports of abuse and discrimination by other religious groups and community leaders, especially in indigenous communities. These groups said some Protestants in mainly rural and/or indigenous areas in Chiapas and Oaxaca were pressured by local indigenous leaders operating under a special constitutionally protected legal structure of “uses and customs” to participate in Catholic cultural religious events, and some stated there was pressure to convert or return to Catholicism. According to evangelical leaders, those who refused faced forcible displacement from their communities, experienced arbitrary detention by local authorities, or had property destroyed by community leaders.

According to some legal experts and NGOs, laws intended to give indigenous communities autonomy to exercise traditional law gave local authorities the ability to harass some members of minority religious groups or force them to follow the majority religion in the area. NGOs and some religious organizations continued to state that a number of rural and indigenous communities expected inhabitants, regardless of their faith, to participate in and fund community religious gatherings, and in some cases adhere to the majority religion. There were continued reports that persons adhering to the minority religious group or coming from outside the community to proselytize faced discrimination from others within the community.

Some members of minority religious groups in indigenous communities stated local authorities denied them public benefits and utilities service due to their religious affiliation.

The DGAR sometimes worked with state and local officials on criminal investigations involving religious groups. At year's end the DGAR investigated three cases related to religious freedom at the federal level, compared with six in 2016. All of the cases investigated by the DGAR took place in the state of Chiapas. According to the DGAR, most incidents of religious discrimination were under the jurisdiction of the state government rather than the federal government. Municipal and state officials commonly mediated disputes among religious groups. Some groups said officials rarely pursued legal remedies against offending local leaders and were often unaware of the applicable laws, preferring instead to reach informal mediated solutions. The groups continued to state there were few investigations and prosecutions of crimes or abuses motivated by a victim's belief or practice, stating this was partially a result of the lack of resources devoted to federal and state agencies and organizations working on religious freedom.

According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), seven Protestant families in the Yaltzi community, Tres Lagunas village, Comitan municipality in the state of Chiapas, were forcibly displaced by village leaders in August due to the former's beliefs. The group consisted of 30 individuals and included children. The families stated they came under pressure to contribute to a Catholic festival and help cover the travel expenses of a visiting Catholic priest who held Mass in the community. When they refused, village authorities cut off their access to water and electricity on August 14. To increase pressure, a group of villagers led by the mayor reportedly ordered the detention of the Protestants in the village jail over a weekend. CSW noted that local village leaders bound the Protestants, threatened to kill them, and denied them food and water. They placed other Protestants under house arrest. After being holding the seven families in jail or under house arrest on August 20-21, village leaders forcibly expelled them from their properties and from the Yaltzi community. CSW reported the state government took no action to resolve the case. The federal Office for Population, Migration, and Religious Affairs sent a letter to the state government requesting information regarding the state government's actions to protect the seven families, who were not allowed to return to their homes.

According to Jalisco state officials, the Jalisco State Commission of Human Rights confirmed 75 members of religious minorities were expelled from the Tuxpan de Bolanos community on December 4. In news reports, Wixarica (aka Huichol)

village leaders said they expelled Jehovah's Witnesses and Baptist residents, who were also of the Wixarica indigenous group, for refusing to participate in some community activities for religious reasons. The secretary of the Jalisco state government said the government would guarantee assistance to the expelled members of the community. Jalisco's Human Rights Prosecutor's Office confirmed the state government had installed working groups to reconcile the right to follow traditions and customs of the indigenous groups with the right to religious freedom.

According to the DGAR, the federal government continued to promote dialogue with religious actors with the stated goal of ensuring the exercise of religious freedom and resolving conflicts arising from religious intolerance. According to CONAPRED the majority of religious discrimination complaints it received were related to religious attire of Muslims, anti-Muslim comments, and the refusal of some hospitals to treat Jehovah's Witnesses due to the latter's refusal to allow blood transfusions. CONAPRED said it assisted in conflict mediation related to these complaints.

Jewish community leaders said that while anti-Semitic attitudes remained a concern, the government took the issue seriously and collaborated closely with the country's Jewish leadership to address hate speech and discrimination incidents.

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

According to NGOs and press reports, Catholic priests and other religious leaders continued to be targeted and were the victims of killings, extortion attempts, death threats, kidnappings, and intimidation by organized criminal groups. Federal government officials maintained these incidents were not a result of targeting for religious beliefs but rather incidents related to overall crime.

The CMC reported the most dangerous states for priests were Chiapas, Tabasco, Mexico City, Puebla, Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, Mexico State, Jalisco, Nayarit, Veracruz, San Luis Potosi, Colima, Culiacan, Tabasco, Michoacan, Guerrero, and Tamaulipas. The CMC reported there were four priests killed during the year, two attempted kidnappings of priests, and attacks on the Metropolitan Cathedral and the Mexican Episcopal Conference's office. The CMC called the country the most violent country for priests in Latin America for the ninth year in a row.

In January Father Felipe Altamirano Carrillo, an indigenous priest in Nayar, Nayarit, was killed while driving. According to news reports, he was the victim of a robbery. An investigation continued at year's end.

Police arrested and authorities charged one suspect following the May 15 assault on Father Jose Miguel Machorro, who was attacked with a knife outside his church after celebrating Mass in the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City. He died of his injuries on August 3. Reports suggested the motive was criminal.

Local authorities stated the motive for the July 5 killing of Father Luis Lopez Villa in his home in Mexico State was robbery, a conclusion disputed by the CMC, which stated there was little evidence of a robbery but rather of a "brutal and premeditated murder." Authorities arrested one suspect.

In March assailants kidnapped Catholic priest Oscar Lopez Navarro in the state of Tamaulipas. He was released the same month after an undisclosed ransom was reportedly paid.

On July 25, an unidentified man placed explosives at the headquarters of the Mexican Episcopal Conference, the principal Catholic organization in the country. The explosion caused damage to the building; no one was injured because the attack took place late at night. On August 4, a man placed a bag of explosives at the main entrance of the Mexican Episcopal Conference's office, located adjacent to the Basilica of Guadalupe. The bag later exploded, damaging the building

In August CSW stated that teachers had forced the 13-year-old daughter of a Protestant pastor in El Mosco, Oaxaca State, to participate in Day of the Dead festivities – which mix Catholic holy days and indigenous traditions – and that the principal threatened to lower her grades if she continued to refuse to participate. At year's end, the outcome of the incident was unclear.

Jewish community representatives reported low levels of anti-Semitic acts and good interreligious cooperation both from the government and civil society organizations in addressing what they said were rare instances of anti-Semitic acts.

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

U.S. embassy and consulate representatives met with government officials responsible for religious and indigenous affairs at the federal and state levels. The representatives raised concerns regarding the continued killings of Catholic priests

and abuses against religious minorities, especially evangelical Protestants, by religious majority groups and local authorities.

Embassy representatives met with members of religious groups and religiously affiliated NGOs, including Libertad y Dignidad, the Central Jewish Committee, Tribuna Israelita, the Catholic Multimedia Center, Impulso 18, and Coordination of Christian Organizations, to discuss the safety of religious workers working on humanitarian issues, assess the status of religious freedom, and express support for religious tolerance.

During the annual U.S.-Mexico Human Rights Dialogue in December, officials from the Department of State underscored the importance of protecting human rights defenders, including religious leaders.