Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship. The law prohibits religious discrimination and provides civil remedies to victims of discrimination. Religion and state are officially separate. The National Office of Religious Affairs (ONAR), an executive government agency, is charged with facilitating communication between faith communities and the government and ensuring the protection of the rights of religious minorities. ONAR and media sources reported arsonists burned down 13 churches in Araucania and Santiago Regions between January and October following more than eight similar incidents in 2017. No one was hurt in the attacks. President Sebastian Pinera responded in September by announcing the Accord for Development and Peace in the Araucania, home to the country’s largest indigenous community, the Mapuche. According to the government, the plan aims to address economic, social, and political grievances that have led to violence and destruction.
Media reported Mapuche opposition to the plan. The Simon Wiesenthal Center, an organization whose mandates include documenting and memorializing the Holocaust, wrote an open letter to President Pinera denouncing his meeting in May with Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas. The letter stated that government reception of PA delegates over the last year “has led to increasing anti-Israel and anti-Jewish activity, especially on university campuses.” The government did not respond publicly to the letter. In March the administration disbanded a government Interfaith Advisory Council formed under the prior administration. The council’s mandate was to facilitate interreligious dialogue between religious and government leaders and to meet with indigenous groups, religious minorities, and civil society leaders. ONAR said the new administration, which took office in March, would set up a new council, but the government did not form the council by year’s end.

Jewish community leaders stated concern about a rise in religious tensions, citing a perceived increase in acrimony toward Jews, especially on the part of the country’s Palestinian population, after the U.S. government moved its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. According to media sources, the Organization of Palestinian Students at the University of Chile Law School denounced a student running for the school’s student council and boycotted the election campaign because of the student’s stated Zionist beliefs. The Organization of Jewish Students of Chile condemned the boycott in a public statement, saying the statements regarding Zionism were “a way to hide anti-Semitism.”

The Ambassador and other embassy representatives periodically met with government officials and religious leaders to discuss religious diversity and tolerance and to raise incidents of concern, including perceived threats to the Jewish community and church burnings in Araucania.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.9 million (July 2018 estimate). According to ONAR estimates in September, approximately 60 percent of the population self-identifies as Roman Catholic and an estimated 18 percent identifies as “evangelical,” a
term used in the country to refer to all non-Catholic Christian groups, including Episcopalians, but not The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Orthodox Churches (including the Armenian, Greek, Persian, Serbian, and Ukrainian communities), and Seventh-day Adventists. In the most recent census that included religious affiliation, conducted in 2002, Baha’is, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of the Orthodox Churches, Seventh-day Adventists, and unspecified members of religious groups together constituted less than 5 percent of the population. An estimated 4 percent of the population identifies as atheist or agnostic, while 17 percent of the population identifies as nonreligious. According to ONAR, 9 percent of the population self-identifies as indigenous, of which approximately 30 percent identify as Catholic, 38 percent as evangelical, and 6 percent identify as other; the remaining 26 percent did not identify with any religion. ONAR states that many of those individuals also incorporate traditional indigenous faith practices into their worship.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the free exercise of worship. It states that these practices must not be “opposed to morals, to good customs or to the public order.” Religious groups may establish and maintain places of worship, as long as the locations comply with public hygiene and security regulations established by laws and municipal orders.

According to the constitution, religion and state are officially separate. The law prohibits discrimination based on religion, provides civil remedies to victims of discrimination based on their religion or belief, and increases criminal penalties for acts of discriminatory violence. The law prohibits discrimination in the provision of discrimination in the provi

https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/chile/
of social services, education, ability to practice religious beliefs or gain employment, property rights, and the rights to build places of worship.

The law does not require religious groups to register with the government; however, there are tax benefits for those that do. Once registered, a religious group is recognized as a religious nonprofit organization; religious organizations have the option of adopting a charter and bylaws suited to a religious entity rather than a private corporation or a secular nonprofit. Under the law, religious nonprofit organizations may create affiliates, such as charitable foundations, schools, or additional houses of worship, which retain the tax benefits of the religious parent organization. According to ONAR, public law recognizes more than 3,200 religious organizations as legal entities. By law, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) may not refuse to accept the registration petition of a religious entity, although it may object to petitions within 90 days if legal prerequisites for registration are not satisfied.

Applicants for religious nonprofit status must present the MOJ with an authorized copy of their charter, corresponding bylaws with signatures, and the national identification numbers of charter signatories. The bylaws must include the organization’s mission, creed, and structure. The charter must specify the signatories, the name of the organization, and its physical address, and it must include confirmation that bylaws have been approved by the religious institutions’ charter signatories. In the event the MOJ raises objections to the group, the group may petition; the petitioning group has 60 days to address the MOJ’s objections or can challenge them in court. Once a religious entity is registered, the state may not dissolve it by decree. If concerns are raised about a religious group’s activities after registration, the semi-autonomous Council for the Defense of the State may initiate a judicial review of the matter. The government has never deregistered a legally registered group. One registration per religious group is sufficient to extend nonprofit status to affiliates, such as additional places of worship or schools, clubs, and sports organizations, without registering them as separate entities. According to ONAR, the MOJ receives approximately 30 petitions monthly. The MOJ has not objected to any petition and has registered every group that completed the required paperwork.

By law, all schools must offer religious education for two teaching hours per week through pre-elementary, elementary, middle, and high school. Local school administrators decide
how religious education classes are structured. The majority of religious instruction in public
schools is Catholic. The Ministry of Education also has approved instruction curricula
designed by 14 other religious groups, such as orthodox and reformed Jews, evangelical
Christians, and Seventh-day Adventists. Schools must provide religious instruction for
students according to students’ religious affiliations. Parents may have their children
excused from religious education. Parents also have the right to homeschool their children
for religious reasons or enroll them in private, religiously oriented schools.

The law grants religious groups the right to appoint chaplains to offer religious services in
public hospitals and prisons. Prisoners may request religious accommodations.
Regulations for the armed forces and law enforcement agencies allow officially registered
religious groups to appoint chaplains to serve in each branch of the armed forces, in the
national uniformed police, and the national investigative police.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

According to ONAR and media reports, from January to November arsonists set fire to 13
churches, primarily in rural Araucania Region and in Santiago Region during Pope Francis’
January visit. There were at least eight arson attacks against churches the previous year.
Of the affected churches, three were evangelical Christian and the others Catholic. The
Araucania region is home to the country’s largest indigenous community, the Mapuche.
According to political sources, the church attacks appeared to fit into the pattern of protest
and sabotage by the Mapuche group Weichan Auka Mapu and Mapuche land rights
sympathizers. They said the attacks targeted a wide range of institutions and private-sector
business interests in the Araucania region, including trucks, farm equipment, a kindergarten,
and farm structures. According to anthropologists, while the Mapuche largely identify as
Christian, they maintain historic grievances against the government for seizing Mapuche
lands, and against Christian churches, which the Mapuche hold responsible for
“colonialization” of the regions. No one was hurt in the attacks. Several Catholic and
evangelical churches and Mapuche leaders publicly called on authorities to strengthen ttheir
investigations into church burnings.
In April judges sentenced brothers Pablo and Benito Trangol to 10 years in prison for arson due to their involvement in the 2016 burning of Our Father Evangelical Church in Temuco. The brothers denied involvement in the incident and affiliation with Weichan Auka Mapu. Weichan Auka Mapu did not claim responsibility for the church burning.

In response to the church burnings and unrest in the region, President Pinera traveled to Araucania in September and announced the National Accord for Development and Peace in the Araucania, a program led by the minister of social development to address the roots of the Mapuche conflict, including ethnicity and religion. The program includes formal constitutional recognition of the country’s indigenous peoples and institutional measures to promote their political participation, mechanisms for government-Mapuche dialogue, and a plan for major investment in infrastructure. Media reported some Mapuche viewed the initiative as a continuation of “economic colonialism” in the region. In September several Mapuche marched in Temuco and other indigenous communities to reject the plan. Other Mapuche leaders in Temuco expressed guarded optimism about the plan.

In July the government granted a Mapuche spiritual leader convicted of homicide a 48-hour temporary release from prison to visit his rewe, or sacred altar, “to renew his spiritual energy.” The government’s action was widely covered by the press.

The Simon Wiesenthal Center, an organization whose mandates include documenting and memorializing the Holocaust, wrote an open letter to President Pinera denouncing his meeting in May with PA President Abbas. The letter stated that government reception of PA delegates over the last year “has led to increasing anti-Israel and anti-Jewish activity, especially on university campuses.” The government did not respond publicly to the letter.

In June several Jewish organizations expressed concern when the mayor of Valdivia announced the town would join the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement. The measure prohibits the city from working with any business that benefits or is linked to “Israel’s occupation of Palestine” or “Israel’s apartheid policy that targets Palestinians.” At year’s end, the central government continued to assess the constitutionality of the city’s decision.
In July the Office of the National Prosecutor announced it had investigated 158 members of the country’s Roman Catholic Church for committing or covering up sexual abuse of minors and adults. The investigation subjects included reports of abuse by bishops, other clerics, and lay workers filed since 2000, with some reported abuses dating back to 1960. According to the office, the number of victims was 266, including 178 children and teenagers. In August investigating prosecutors raided the headquarters of the Catholic Church’s Episcopal Conference as part of a widespread investigation into sex abuse committed by members of the Marist Brothers order.

Catholic and Episcopalian leaders condemned congress’ September approval of a gender identity law, allowing transgender individuals 14 years and older with parental or a guardian’s consent to change their name and gender in official records. In January authorities removed a group of protesters from congress after they interrupted a debate over sex changes for transgender youth. The protesters said sex change operations were “against the will of God” and contrary to religious teachings.

In March the government disbanded the Interfaith Advisory Council, a roundtable organization created by the previous administration and comprising religious leaders representing the country’s religious communities, including Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and Baha’is, among others. ONAR said it would convene another similar body, with members chosen by the new administration, but the government did not form the council by year’s end.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Jewish community leaders stated concern about a rise in religious tensions, citing a perceived increase in acrimony towards Jews, especially on the part of the country’s Palestinian population, after the U.S. government moved its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. La Comunidad Judia de Chile, a leading Jewish civil society organization, reported a graffiti drawing reading “Resist Palestine” outside a Jewish community center in Santiago; a flyer that read “Free Palestine” inside the bathroom of a Sephardic Jewish
community center in Santiago in July; and an article in a Valdivia city newspaper authored by a local Chilean-Palestinian youth group that denounced Israel as “an apartheid state and a terrorist country that has initiated an ethnic and cultural extermination” against the Palestinian people.

According to media, the General Union of Palestinian Students chapter at the University of Chile’s Law School denounced and boycotted the student council campaign of a Jewish student who they said professed Zionist beliefs. The Organization of Jewish Students of Chile condemned the boycott in a public statement, saying the statements regarding Zionism were “a way to hide anti-Semitism.”

Jewish community leaders also expressed concern about anti-Semitic social media commentary against individual and Jewish community groups. In May graffiti found on the walls of the E50 Republic of Israel public school read “No to the plan andinia [sic], inform yourself” (referring to a long-held conspiracy theory circulated by anti-Semitic groups that Jews planned on creating a Jewish state in parts of Chile and Argentina) and “Israel terrorist state,” along with the Star of David, an equal sign, and following it, a swastika.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials met regularly with ONAR officials, civil society groups, regional government leaders, and law enforcement representatives to express concern about the impact of the church burnings on religious minorities in Araucania and neighboring regions.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials met with religious leaders to discuss the status of religious minorities in the country, expressions of anti-Semitism, religious minorities’ security concerns, and institutional cooperation among government and religious organizations. The embassy celebrated International Religious Freedom Day and the United Nations’ International Day for Tolerance with social media posts encouraging interfaith understanding and religious tolerance.
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