Chile

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR
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The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 292,260 square miles and a population of 15 million. According to the most recent census (2002), 70 percent of the population over age 14 identifies as Roman Catholic and 15.1 percent as evangelical. In the census, the term "evangelical" referred to all non-Catholic Christian churches with the exception of the Orthodox Church (Greek, Persian, Serbian, Ukrainian, and Armenian), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Approximately 90 percent of "evangelicals" are Pentecostal. Wesleyan, Lutheran, Reformed Evangelical, Presbyterian, Anglican, Episcopal, Baptist, and Methodist churches constitute the remaining 10 percent. Other groups include Jews, Muslims, Baha'is, Buddhists, and members of the Unification Church.

Indigenous persons make up 5 percent (780,000) of the population. Sixty-five percent of indigenous persons identify themselves as Catholic, 29 percent as evangelical, and 6 percent as "other." Mapuche communities, constituting 87 percent of indigenous citizens, continue to respect traditional religious leaders (Longkos and Machis), and anecdotal information indicates a high degree of syncretism in worship and traditional healing practices.

Members of the largest religious groups (Catholics; Pentecostals and other evangelicals) are present throughout the country. Jewish communities are located in Santiago, Valparaíso, Viña del Mar, Valdivia, Temuco, Concepción, La Serena, and Iquique (there is no synagogue in Iquique). Mosques are located in Santiago, Iquique, and Coquimbo.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.
Church and state are officially separate. The 1999 law on religion prohibits religious discrimination; however, the Catholic Church enjoys a privileged status and occasionally receives preferential treatment. Government officials attend Catholic events and also major Protestant and Jewish ceremonies. The national Office for Religious Affairs is mandated to work with all religious organizations to ensure the implementation of constitutional guarantees for religious freedom.

The Government observes Good Friday, the Feast of the Virgin of Carmen, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the Feast of the Assumption, All Saints’ Day, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and Christmas as national holidays. In October 2008 the Government declared October 31 to be an annual national holiday to honor the evangelical and Protestant churches.

The law allows any religious group to apply for legal public right status (comprehensive religious nonprofit status). The Ministry of Justice may not refuse to accept a registration petition, although it may object to the petition within 90 days on the grounds that all legal prerequisites for registration were not satisfied. The petitioner then has 60 days to address objections raised by the Ministry or challenge the Ministry in court. Once a religious entity is registered, the state cannot dissolve it by decree. The semiautonomous Council for the Defense of the State may initiate a judicial review; however, no organization that registered under the 1999 law was subsequently deregistered. In addition, the law allows religious entities to adopt a charter and bylaws suited to a religious organization rather than a private corporation. They may establish affiliates (schools, clubs, and sports organizations) without registering them as separate corporations. During the reporting period, 213 religious organizations registered under the 1999 law and gained legal public right status, bringing the total to 1,872 registered religious groups.

The 1999 law on religion grants other religious groups the same right that the Catholic Church possesses to have chaplains in public hospitals, prisons, and military units. Hospital regulations continue specifically to permit Catholic chaplains in hospitals and, if requested by a patient, to provide access to chaplains and lay practitioners of other religions. In the prison system, there were 35 Catholic chapels, 40 paid Catholic chaplains, 25 volunteer Catholic chaplains, and 1,200 religious or lay volunteers authorized to conduct Catholic religious activities; there were nine paid evangelical Christian chaplains, 90 volunteer chaplains, and more than 2,000 evangelical Christian volunteers representing 200 evangelical groups.

In 2008 the Government approved regulations for the armed forces and law enforcement agencies that had been pending since the passage of the 1999 law. These regulations allow officially registered religious groups to appoint a chaplain to serve in each branch of the armed forces, in the national uniformed police, and in the national investigative police.

Publicly subsidized schools are required to offer religious education twice a week through high school; participation is optional (with parental waiver). Religious instruction in public schools is almost exclusively Catholic, although the Ministry of Education approved curriculums for 14 other religious groups. Teaching the creed requested by parents is mandatory; however, enforcement is sometimes lax, and non-Catholic religious education is often provided privately through Sunday schools and other venues. Local school administrators decide how funds are spent on religious instruction. The national Office of Religious Affairs recommended the creation of municipal Offices of Religious Affairs to develop community-supported curriculums in public schools and provide non-Catholic religious education where appropriate. The lack of non-Catholic religion teachers and funding constraints hindered implementation in all municipalities. Parents may homeschool their children or enroll them in private schools for religious reasons.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom
The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

The celebration of Catholic Mass frequently marks official and public events. If the event is of a military nature, all members of participating units may be obliged to attend.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On October 10, 2008, President Bachelet signed a law designating October 31 as an annual national holiday honoring the evangelical and other Protestant churches. Celebrated for the first time in 2008, it marks the day in 1517 when Martin Luther posted The Ninety-Five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The Jewish Community of Chile, an umbrella organization that represents all Jewish organizations in the country, recorded 168 anti-Semitic incidents during the reporting period, an increase from 134 incidents during the previous period. These included spray-painted swastikas, other acts of vandalism, verbal slurs, and online harassment. On January 4, 2009, an unidentified individual called the police with a death threat against Jewish teenagers who were participating in a summer camp in Pirque. In September 2008 vandals desecrated several Jewish graves in the General Cemetery of Santiago.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.