



Chile

International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

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 period covered by this report.

There were no 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 identify 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 are also present.

Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, Jews, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Baha'is, Buddhists, and members of the Unification Church. Of those surveyed, all other religions total 493,147 persons, or 4.4 percent, and atheists and those "indifferent" regarding religion constitute approximately 8.3 percent.

Indigenous people make up 5 percent (780,000) of the population. Sixty-five percent of indigenous people 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 (Catholic, Pentecostal, and other evangelical churches) are numerous in the capital and are also found in other regions of the country. Jewish communities are located in Santiago, Valparaíso, Viña del Mar, Valdivia, Temuco, Concepción, La Serena, and Iquique (although there is no synagogue in Iquique). Mosques are located in Santiago, Iquique, and Coquimbo.

Section II. Status of 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. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

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 Government observes Christmas, Good Friday, the Feast of the Virgin of Carmen, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the Feast of the Assumption, All Saints' Day, and the Feast of the Immaculate Conception as national holidays.

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 have not been 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 has registered under the 1999 law has subsequently been deregistered.

In addition, the law allows religious entities to adopt a charter and by-laws 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 period covered by this report 516 religious organizations registered under the 1999 law and gained legal public right status, bringing the total to 1,659 registered religious groups.

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. Teaching the creed requested by parents is mandatory; however, enforcement is sometimes lax, and religious education in faiths other than Catholicism is often provided privately through Sunday schools and at other venues. Local school administrations decide how funds are spent on religious instruction. Although the Ministry of Education has approved curriculums for 14 other denominations, 92 percent of public schools and 81 percent of private schools offered only Catholic instruction. 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 period covered by this report.

The 1999 law on religion grants other religions and denominations 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. 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 in the prison system. There were approximately 9 paid evangelical Christian chaplain positions at the national level, 90 volunteer chaplains, and more than 1,200 evangelical Christian volunteers representing 82 evangelical denominations conducting religious activities in the prison system. Non-Catholic pastors reported that their access to prisons and hospitals continued to improve during the period covered by this report.

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

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees 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 of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In May 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 creeds to appoint a chaplain to serve in each of the branches of the armed forces, in the national uniformed police force, and in the national investigations police force.

In September 2007 the Government opened a national Office for Religious Affairs whose mandate is to work with all religious organizations to ensure the implementation of constitutional guarantees for religious freedom.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

In April 2008 an anonymous bomb threat targeted the Coquimbo mosque. Police searched the building and confirmed that it was a false alarm.

There were several reports of anti-Semitic incidents, including spray-painted graffiti of swastikas and derogatory comments directed at Jewish institutions and individuals. In March 2008 in Concepción the Jewish temple was spray-painted with graffiti and the front door of a Jewish home was spray-painted with a swastika. Press reports indicated that the authorities opened an investigation and identified two suspects. In July 2007 neighbors of a Jewish woman in Santiago reportedly insulted her, entered her apartment, vandalized her automobile, and severed her telephone connection. Also in July 2007 graffiti allegedly was spray-painted on a store in Santiago. Street gangs identifying themselves as neo-Nazis or "skinheads" and often utilizing swastikas and other anti-Semitic symbols committed acts of violence against non-Jewish victims in Santiago and other urban areas. There were no reports that these groups targeted the Jewish community.

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.

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