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El Salvador

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

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 8,108 square miles with a population of 6.1 million. According to a May survey by the University Institute of Public Opinion, part of the University of Central America, 52.2 percent of the population identifies as Catholic, 33 percent as evangelical, 13.5 percent reports "no religion," and 1.3 percent reports "other." A 2009 survey by the institute listed the main evangelical churches as Assemblies of God, Baptist, Elim Church, and Church of God. There are small communities of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishnas, Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists. A very small segment of the population observes indigenous religious practices. Some Catholic rituals incorporate indigenous elements.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. The constitution states that all persons are equal before the law and prohibits discrimination based on nationality, race, gender, or religion.

Article 296 of the penal code imposes criminal sentences of six months to two years on those who publicly offend or insult the religious beliefs of others, or damage or destroy religious objects. If such acts are carried out with and for the purpose of publicity, sentences increase to one to three years in prison. Repeat offenders face prison sentences of three to eight years.

The constitution requires the president, cabinet ministers, vice ministers, Supreme Court justices, judges, governors, the attorney general, the public defender, and other senior government officials to be laypersons. In addition, 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 Roman Catholic Church and states that other religious groups may also apply for official recognition. The law grants tax-exempt status to all officially recognized religious groups. The regulations also make donations to officially recognized religious groups tax-deductible.

The law for nonprofit organizations and foundations charges the Ministry of Governance with registering, regulating, and overseeing the finances of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), non-Catholic churches, and other religious groups. The law specifically exempts unions, cooperatives, and the Catholic Church from this registration requirement. During the reporting period, there were 57 new requests for registration, of which 19 were approved, 38 were pending, and none were reported denied.

The law states that religious groups other than the Catholic Church may apply for official recognition. Although not required to register with the government, a group must do so to incorporate formally and receive tax-exempt status. The civil code grants equal status to churches and nonprofit foundations. For official recognition, an organization or 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 that describe the type of organization, location of its offices, its goals and principles, requirements for membership, type and function of its ruling bodies, and assessments or dues. Before the DGFASFL grants registration, it must determine that the group's constitution and bylaws do not violate the law. Once a group is registered, notice of DGFASFL approval and the group's constitution and bylaws must be published in the official gazette. The DGFASFL does not maintain records on religious organizations once their status has been approved.

Noncitizens present in the country primarily to proselytize must obtain a special residence visa for religious activities and are not allowed to proselytize while on a visitor or tourist visa.

Public education is secular. Private religious schools operate freely. All private schools, whether religious or secular, must meet the same standards to obtain approval from the Ministry of Education.

The president attended different religious ceremonies to promote interfaith understanding.

A 1940 law established Holy Week holidays for public employees, and each year the Legislative Assembly issues a decree establishing Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday as official holidays for the private sector.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Leaders of the Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, evangelical, Islamic, Jewish, and Buddhist religious groups participate in the Council of Religions for Peace.

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. U.S. embassy officials maintained a regular dialogue with principal religious leaders, church-sponsored universities, and NGOs.

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