

# **EL SALVADOR 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. embassy officials met periodically with government officials, religious leaders, and university officials to discuss religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to the National Directorate of Census and Statistics of the Ministry of the Economy, the population is approximately 6.2 million. According to a May survey by the Institute of Public Opinion of the University of Central America, 47 percent identifies as Roman Catholic and 33 percent as evangelical. The survey reported 17 percent as having "no religion." There are small numbers of Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishnas, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). A small segment of the population adheres to indigenous religious beliefs.

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

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

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

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. There have been no prosecutions under this law.

## EL SALVADOR

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 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. Regulations also make donations to officially recognized religious groups tax-deductible.

The civil code grants equal status to churches and nonprofit foundations. For religious groups, registration with the government confers legal recognition as a religious organization. Although religious groups may carry out religious activities without registering with the government, registration makes it easier to conduct activities requiring official permits, such as building churches. To obtain official recognition, a 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 describing the type of organization, location of its offices, its goals and principles, requirements for membership, 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 as a nonprofit religious organization, 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 groups once it approves their status.

By law, the Ministry of Governance has authority to register, regulate, and oversee the finances of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), non-Catholic churches, and other religious groups. The law specifically exempts the Catholic Church from the registration requirement. As of November, there were 175 new requests for registration of religious groups, of which 108 were approved, 64 were pending, two were withdrawn voluntarily, and one was deferred for lack of response from the applicants. None was denied.

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

## **EL SALVADOR**

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

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, All Souls Day, and Christmas.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

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

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, evangelical, Islamic, Jewish, and Buddhist leaders participated in the Council of Religions for Peace. The Council organized events promoting anti-crime initiatives and environmental awareness and conducted prison visits.

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

U.S. embassy officials met with the assistant ombudsman for civil rights, who reported that his office received no complaints about violations of religious freedom during the year. Embassy officials reviewed the registration process for religious groups with the director general for nonprofit associations and foundations at the Ministry of Governance. Senior embassy officials, including the ambassador and deputy chief of mission, met with leaders of religious groups to discuss religious freedom and security issues. Embassy officials also discussed religious freedom with the director of the Human Rights Institute of the University of Central America as well as representatives of indigenous religious groups.