



Mexico

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, usually in small, rural communities in the south. Most incidents occurred in the states of Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Hidalgo, and to a lesser extent in Mexico, Michoacán, Veracruz, and Nayarit. Government officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and evangelical and Roman Catholic representatives agreed that these conflicts were often attributable to political, ethnic, or land disputes related to the traditional "practices and customs" of indigenous communities.

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 1,220,663 square miles and a population of 109 million. According to the Government's 2000 census, approximately 88 percent of respondents identify themselves as at least nominally Catholic. There are an estimated 11,000 Catholic churches and 14,000 Catholic priests and nuns. An additional estimated 90,000 laypersons worked in the Catholic Church. Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include evangelicals (Pentecostals, neo-Pentecostals, and Pentecostal Roots), "historical" Protestants (defined by the Government as Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Nazarenes, Mennonites, and others), Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Muslims, and Jews.

The General Director for Religious Associations of the Federal Secretariat of Government (GDAR) registered 169 evangelical and traditional Protestant associations. The exact number of evangelical and other Protestant churches and pastors is unknown, and statistics on membership remain scant. Official figures sometimes differ from membership claims of religious groups. For example, the Seventh-day Adventist Church claims a nationwide membership of 600,000 to 700,000 persons; however, in the 2000 census only 488,945 persons identified themselves as such. Also in the 2000 census, 205,229 persons identified themselves as Mormons, whereas Mormons claim membership of approximately 1.2 million. Protestants are concentrated primarily in the south. In the State of Chiapas, 21.9 percent of respondents in the 2000 census identified themselves as Protestant; however, some Protestant evangelical groups claim a much higher percentage. The National Bar of Christian Lawyers reported that in November 2008 they requested that the Interior Secretariat include a category for evangelical Christian in the next census but did not receive a reply.

The Jewish community claims approximately 50,000 members, most of whom live in Mexico City; there are also congregations in Guadalajara, Monterrey, Tijuana, and Cancún. There is a small Shi'ite Muslim population in the city of Torreón, Coahuila and an estimated 300 Muslims in the San Cristobal de las Casas area in Chiapas. Some indigenous persons in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Yucatán practice a syncretic religion that mixes Catholic and pre-Hispanic Mayan religious beliefs.

In some communities, particularly in the south, there is a correlation between politics and religious affiliation. A small number of local leaders reportedly manipulate religious tensions in their communities for their own political or economic benefit, particularly in Chiapas.

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. The Government is secular.

Article 24 of the Constitution states that all persons are free to profess their chosen religious belief and to practice its ceremonies and acts of worship. Congress may not enact laws that establish or prohibit any religion. The Constitution also provides for the separation of church and state. The Constitution bars members of the clergy from holding public office, advocating partisan political views, supporting political candidates, or opposing the laws or institutions of the state. The law on Religious Associations and Public Worship defines the administrative remedies that protect the right to religious freedom. The Constitution prohibits any form of discrimination, including on the basis of religion.

The law permits religious groups to operate informally without registering with the Government; however, for a religious group to obtain a legal personality, which is necessary to negotiate contracts and purchase or rent land, it must register with the GDAR as a religious association. The registration process is routine. The most recent statistics show that 7,074 religious associations were registered, of which most were evangelical Protestant. During the reporting period, the GDAR registered 202 associations, some of which had applied for registration previously. In addition, at the end of the reporting period, a number of applications either awaited further supporting documentation or were not in compliance with registration criteria.

To register as a religious association, a group must articulate its fundamental doctrines and religious beliefs, not be organized primarily for profit, and not promote acts that are physically harmful or dangerous to its members. Religious groups must be registered to apply for official building permits, receive tax exemptions, and hold religious meetings outside their places of worship.

Religious associations must notify the Government of their intention to hold a religious meeting outside of a licensed place of worship. Thousands of notifications are typically submitted every year, and the Government routinely approves such requests. Religious associations may not hold any sort of political meeting.

The GDAR promotes religious tolerance and investigates cases of religious intolerance. The GDAR has translated the Religious Associations and Public Worship Law into 11 indigenous languages, including Purépecha from the State of Michoacán this reporting period, with the intention of completing a total of 16. If parties present a religious dispute to the GDAR, it attempts to mediate a solution. If mediation fails, the parties may submit the issue to the GDAR for binding arbitration. If the parties do not agree to this procedure, one or the other may elect to seek judicial redress. Municipal and state officials generally were responsive in mediating disputes among communities; however, when a solution was not found, officials were not always aggressive in pursuing legal remedies against offending local

leaders.

The Federal Government coordinates religious affairs through the Ministry of Interior. Most states have specific offices dedicated to religious affairs; Chiapas, Guerrero, and Nuevo León have undersecretaries for religious affairs.

Of eight official holidays, Christmas Day is the only religious holy day that the Government observes; however, most employers also grant Holy Thursday, Good Friday, All Souls' Day, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and Christmas Eve to employees as paid holidays.

The Government requires religious groups to apply for a permit to construct new buildings or convert existing buildings into houses of worship. Any religious building constructed since 1992 is the property of the religious association that built it. All religious buildings erected before 1992 are classified as national patrimony, owned by the state, and exempt from taxes.

Religious groups may not own or administer broadcast radio or television stations. Government permission is required to transmit religious programming on commercial broadcast radio or television.

The Constitution states that public education must be secular, but religious groups are free to maintain private schools. Primary level homeschooling for religious reasons is not explicitly prohibited or supported by the law; however, to enter a secondary school, one must have attended an accredited primary school. Homeschooling is allowed at the secondary level after schooling at an accredited primary school has been completed.

The work of religious clergy in public institutions such as jails or hospitals is neither explicitly prohibited nor supported by law.

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. Most of the discrimination occurred at the state and local levels. State and municipal governments generally protected religious freedom; however, some local community leaders and authorities, particularly in the south, allegedly used religious affiliation as a pretext for conflicts related to political, ethnic, or land disputes.

The Federal Government limits the number of visas each religious group is allowed; however, the application process is routine and uncomplicated. During the reporting period, the Government issued 2,408 visas to missionaries.

In May 2009 in La Trinitaria, Chiapas, a local religious rights organization reported that local authorities prohibited 70 evangelical Protestants, including 30 children, from purchasing basic foodstuffs as part of a governmental program for families. These actions were allegedly in retaliation for the families' refusal to contribute to local festivals typically occurring on Catholic holy days. In 2008 the same families reportedly had their utilities suspended for similar reasons.

In July 2008 the press reported that local authorities threatened Methodist families in Zopilotepec, Guerrero with loss of their church, physical harm to their children, and expulsion from the community.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, poor enforcement mechanisms

allowed community leaders in Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Hidalgo, and several other states to discriminate against persons based on their religious beliefs. Federal and local government officials often failed to punish those responsible for acts of religious intolerance. The GDAR worked actively with state and local officials; however, criminal investigations generally tended to be sluggish.

In January 2009 in San Juan Chamula, Chiapas, according to news reports, Catholics allegedly destroyed the foundation of an evangelical church under construction, and local authorities jailed the church's pastor.

In November 2008 local authorities reportedly detained three evangelical leaders--Roberto Martinez Santiago, Cristobal Pedro Martinez Jeronimo, and Benito Jeronimo Jeronimo--in Santiago Teotlaxco, Oaxaca for two days for refusing to contribute to or participate in local festivals typically occurring on Catholic holy days.

According to 2007 press reports, local authorities in Chiapas jailed Juan Mendez after his conversion to evangelical Christianity and released him the next morning.

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.

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, usually in small, rural communities in the south. Most incidents occurred in the states of Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Hidalgo and to a lesser extent in Mexico, Michoacán, Veracruz, and Nayarit. Religious differences frequently were cited as the cause of such incidents; however, the disputes often concerned other factors, including ethnic differences, land disputes, and struggles over local political and economic power.

In the central and southern regions, some leaders of predominantly Catholic indigenous communities regarded evangelical groups as unwelcome outside influences and as economic and political threats. These leaders reportedly sometimes acquiesced in or ordered the harassment or expulsion of individuals belonging chiefly to Protestant evangelical groups. Local human rights organizations noted that conflicts were increasing due to lack of intervention by the state government. As in previous reporting periods, village leaders often imposed sanctions on evangelicals for resisting participation in community festivals or refusing to work on Sundays. Evangelicals complained of water cut-offs, expulsion from their villages, loss of community rights and personal possessions, beatings, death threats, the burning of churches and homes, and denial of government benefits due to religious affiliation. This was particularly common in Chiapas, where many residents follow a unique and centuries-old syncretistic mix of Catholicism and native custom. Endemic poverty, land tenure disputes, and a lack of educational opportunities also contributed to tensions, which at times resulted in violence.

Evangelicals often resisted making financial donations demanded by community norms that served partly to fund local festivals typically occurring on Catholic holy days. The National Bar of Christian Lawyers reported that it had to close its offices in Chiapas due to security concerns and could not provide updates on the cases of unresolved religious intolerance against evangelical Christians in Chiapas cited in the last report. The National Bar reported that there were 50 unresolved cases in the country, not including Chiapas, at the end of the reporting period.

In January 2009, according to press reports, electricity and water services to 74 evangelical families were suspended in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas. Demonstrators surrounded the governor's palace in protest.

In December 2008 Catholic groups and local authorities in San Nicolás, Ixmiquilpan reportedly prevented the burial of a 59-year-old evangelical woman, Otilia Corona, in the town cemetery. Although her family made a \$260 (3,400 peso) contribution towards maintenance of the cemetery, they were not permitted to bury her there. She was interred at her home in violation of general health laws.

In Zinacantán, Chiapas, a group of Catholics, with the alleged support of town authorities, reportedly threatened to take up arms against evangelicals who refused to contribute to local religious festivities. On November 19, 2008, evangelical Protestants from the town held a press conference denouncing the threats.

On June 13, 2009, Catholic priest Habacuc Hernández Benítez and two seminarians (Eduardo Oregón Benítez and Silvestre González Cambrón) were killed in Arcelia in the State of Guerrero. Although the motive was unclear, some news reports linked the killings to remarks by the Archbishop of Durango against drug traffickers.

On September 2, 2008, Catholic priest Gerardo Manuel Miranda Avalos was killed in a drive-by shooting at the entrance of a Catholic school in Los Reyes, Michoacán. In May 2008 Catholic priest Julio Cesar Mendoza Acuma died in a hospital in Mexico City following an attack by at least three armed individuals the previous night in his parish residence. In January 2008 the College of Catholic Lawyers, a lay group providing legal counsel to the Catholic Church, requested that authorities from the Federal District, Hidalgo, and Aguascalientes provide the status of the investigations into the criminally related killings of three Catholic priests, Humberto Macias Rosales, Fernando Sanchez Duran, and Ricardo Junious, in 2007. All of these cases remained under investigation at the end of the reporting period.

GDAR stated that it received three reports of religious intolerance in the country during the reporting period and that two of 14 pending conflicts were resolved. Government officials, the president of the National Human Rights Commission, and interfaith groups continued discussions about incidents of intolerance in order to promote social harmony. The Mexico City Interfaith Council included representatives from a broad spectrum of religious groups. Interfaith councils were also present in Chiapas, Nuevo León, and the Yucatán.

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 representatives met with government officials for religious and indigenous affairs and human rights at federal and state levels. Embassy officers also met with members of religious groups and NGOs.