



Mexico

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; however, there were some restrictions at the local level. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

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, and Oaxaca, and to a lesser extent Mexico, Michoacán, and Veracruz. Government officials, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and evangelical and Roman Catholic representatives agreed that these conflicts were often attributed to political, ethnic, or land disputes, which were 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 Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Nazarene, Mennonite, and others), Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jews.

The General Director for Religious Associations of the Federal Secretariat of Government (GDAR) registered a total of 3,554 evangelical and 80 traditional Protestant associations. The exact number of evangelical and 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, according to the 2000 census, only 488,945 persons identify themselves as such. Also according to the 2000 census, 205,229 persons identify themselves as Mormons, whereas the Mormons claim membership of approximately 1.2 million. Non-Catholic Christians are concentrated primarily in the south. In the State of Chiapas, 21.9 percent of respondents in the 2000 census identify themselves as Protestant; however, some Protestant evangelical groups claim a much higher percentage.

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 Muslim population in the city of Torreón, Coahuila, and there are an estimated 300 Muslims in the San Cristobal de las Casas area in Chiapas. Some indigenous people 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 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.

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, and 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 6,869 religious associations were registered, of which the majority were evangelical Protestant or Catholic. During the period covered by this report, the GDAR registered 210 associations, some of which had applied for registration previously. In addition, at the end of the period covered by this report, 207 applications either awaited further supporting documentation or were not in compliance with registration criteria.

To be registered 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 Law into 10 indigenous languages, 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 grant Holy Thursday, Good Friday, All Souls' Day, Virgin of Guadalupe Day, and Christmas Eve also.

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 after 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. State and municipal governments generally protected this right; however, 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. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

The Federal Government limits the number of visas each religious group is allowed; however, the application process is routine and uncomplicated.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, poor enforcement mechanisms allowed community leaders in Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, 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 in general tended to be sluggish.

In 2005 the director of the Lázaro Cárdenas Teachers College in Arteaga, Michoacán, suspended six student teachers who were Jehovah's Witnesses, alleging that they lacked sufficient patriotic fervor. In February 2007 four of the students appealed to the federal court. On November 13, 2007, a circuit court ruled that their petition was not in adherence with the law.

In 2006 a trial court upheld the suspension of another student over the recommendations issued by the National Commission of Human Rights. Also in 2006 the federal court decided in favor of another student regarding the nature of the authority of the school officials. The student subsequently appealed the suspension in federal court; his case was pending at the end of the reporting period.

In 2007, according to press reports, in Tzotzil Maya, Zinacatan Municipality in the State of Chiapas, local authorities jailed Juan Mendez after his conversion to evangelical Christianity and released him the next morning.

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.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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,

and Oaxaca, and to a lesser extent in Mexico, Michoacán, and Veracruz. 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 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 state government involvement. As in previous reporting periods, village leaders imposed sanctions on evangelicals for resisting participation in community festivals or refusing to work on Sundays. Common complaints by evangelicals included local leaders cutting off the water, expelling residents from the villages, or denying them benefits from government programs because of their religious affiliation. This was particularly common in Chiapas, where many residents follow a unique and centuries-old syncretistic mix of Catholicism and native custom (Catholic-Mayan). Endemic poverty, land tenure disputes, and 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 holidays and often involving alcohol. The National Bar of Christian Lawyers reported 200 cases of unresolved religious intolerance against evangelical Christians in Chiapas. GDAR reports that at the end of the reporting period, the National Bar was only able to substantiate 58 of the reported 200 conflicts and that many were never formally reported to authorities.

On March 4, 2008, in Los Pozos, in the State of Chiapas, local community leaders, after having signed an agreement, reportedly restored utility services to eight evangelical families whose utilities had been suspended in 2007.

On February 18, 2008, de facto community leaders in Tlapa, Guerrero, allegedly expelled three evangelical families from the municipality who resisted paying fees for Catholic observances during Holy Week. Authorities reportedly addressed the issue by relocating the families to outlying areas. The local Office of Integrative Family Development (DIF) coordinated economic support and construction materials for new homes for the relocated families.

According to news reports, local community leaders in Santa Rita, in the State of Chiapas, suspended water and electrical utilities to nine evangelical families and one Jehovah's Witness family in 2001 for failure to participate in Catholic festivals. In February 2008 the conflict was resolved and utilities restored to all ten families.

On February 1, 2008, government officials from the State of Chiapas toured the municipalities of Socoltenango and Las Margaritas to ensure compliance of the agreements between Catholics and evangelicals. They verified that electricity and water were restored to certain families in the Estrella Roja community and ensured that community members of San Antonio Venecia abided by the signed agreement.

On January 7, 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 (killed May 1, 2007; July 22, 2007; and July 29, 2007 respectively). The investigations remained pending at the end of the reporting period.

There were several reports of anti-Semitism reported in the local press, including bomb threats, e-mails, publications, and graffiti. In May 2008 anti-Semitic graffiti reportedly was found in the Monterrey airport, at the Jewish community sports center in Mexico City, and near the Ramat Shalom Temple located in the State of Mexico. On October 23, 2007, a caller allegedly made a bomb threat to a Jewish school in Mexico City. GDAR received no formal complaints of anti-Semitism during the reporting period.

In addition to the 58 substantiated cases from the National Bar of Christian Lawyers, GDAR stated that it received 3 additional reports of religious intolerance in the country during the reporting year and that 14 pending conflicts were resolved. Government officials, the national human rights ombudsman, and interfaith

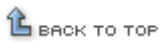
groups continued discussions about incidents of intolerance in order to promote social harmony. The Mexico City Interfaith Council included representatives from the Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Mormon, Lutheran, other Protestant, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh Dharma, and Sufi Islam communities. 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.

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