

# **MEXICO 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. However, there were some restrictions at the local level. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, frequently in small rural communities in the south.

U.S. embassy and consulate representatives met regularly with officials from the federal and state governments and with members of a variety of religious groups to discuss religious freedom and human rights. In particular, the embassy expanded its engagement with the Jewish community, which reported increased instances of anti-Semitism in the form of social media attacks against prominent Jewish intellectuals and activists.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The population is approximately 112.3 million, according to the 2010 census. Approximately 83 percent identify themselves as Roman Catholic (down from 89 percent in the 2000 census). Approximately 8 percent are affiliated with evangelical or other Protestant churches, 2 percent identify themselves as members of other Bible-based religions, and less than 1 percent identify as Jewish. More than 5 percent report not practicing any religion.

Official statistics occasionally differ from membership figures religious groups provide. Approximately 314,900 individuals identify themselves as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) in the 2010 census; however, Mormon Church in Mexico officials assert their membership is approximately 1.3 million. There are large Protestant communities in the southern states of Chiapas and Tabasco. In Chiapas, Protestant evangelical leaders state nearly half of the state's 2.4 million inhabitants are members of evangelical groups, but less than 5 percent of 2010 census respondents in Chiapas self-identify as evangelical.

According to the 2010 census, the Jewish community numbers approximately 67,500, some 42,000 of whom live in Mexico City and the state of Mexico; there

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are also small numbers of Jews in Morelos, Oaxaca, Puebla, and Veracruz. Nearly half of the country's approximately 4,000 Muslims are concentrated in Mexico City and the state of Mexico. A community of approximately 50,000 Mennonites is concentrated mostly in Chihuahua. Some indigenous persons in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Yucatan adhere to a syncretic religion combining Catholic and pre-Hispanic Mayan beliefs.

In some communities, particularly in the south, there is a correlation between politics and religious affiliation. A small number of local leaders reportedly manipulated 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 and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The government is secular. The constitution states that all persons are free to profess their chosen religious belief and to engage in 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. In March a wide spectrum of religious and non-religious groups supported the formal addition of the adjective 'secular' (*laico*) to the definition of the Mexican Republic in Article 40 of the constitution. The constitution prohibits any form of discrimination, including on the basis of religion. The Religious Associations and Public Worship Law, available in eleven indigenous languages, defines administrative remedies protecting the right to religious freedom.

The federal government coordinates religious affairs through the Secretariat of Government. The General Directorate for Religious Associations (DGAR) promotes religious tolerance through public information campaigns and conflict mediation and investigates cases of religious intolerance. If parties present a dispute based on allegations of religious intolerance to the DGAR, it attempts to mediate a solution. If mediation fails, the parties may submit the issue to the DGAR for binding arbitration. If the parties do not agree to this procedure, one or the other may elect to seek judicial redress.

The National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) promotes religious tolerance through outreach efforts and conducts a survey on discrimination,

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including discrimination based on religion. CONAPRED also receives complaints of discrimination based on religious beliefs and mediates conflicts. All states have administrative offices with responsibility over religious affairs and 22 federal entities have specialized offices dedicated to religious affairs. Chiapas, Guerrero, Yucatan, and Oaxaca have undersecretaries for religious affairs.

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 group that built it. All religious buildings erected before 1992 are classified as part of the national patrimony, owned by the state, and exempt from taxes.

The law permits religious groups to operate informally without registering with the government; however, to obtain legal status, a religious group must register with the DGAR as a religious association. To register, 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 negotiate contracts and purchase or rent land, apply for official building permits, receive tax exemptions, and hold religious meetings outside their customary places of worship.

Religious associations must notify the government of their intention to hold a religious meeting outside of a licensed place of worship. The government routinely approves the thousands of such requests submitted each year. Religious associations may not hold political meetings of any kind.

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

The constitution states that public education must be secular, but religious groups are free to maintain private schools. The law takes no position on primary level homeschooling for religious reasons, but to enter a secondary school, one must have attended an accredited primary school. Homeschooling is allowed at the secondary level after completion of schooling at an accredited primary school.

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.

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The government observes Christmas Day as a national holiday; 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.

### Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Most incidents of restriction of religious freedom occurred at the state and local levels. Some local community leaders and authorities, particularly in the south, reportedly used religious affiliation as a pretext for conflicts related to political, ethnic, or land disputes. Some members of indigenous communities alleged the authorities denied them government benefits due to religious affiliation.

Poor enforcement mechanisms allowed local authorities in several states, often leaders of semi-autonomous indigenous communities, to discriminate against community members based on their religious beliefs. Federal and local government officials often failed to punish those responsible for acts of religious intolerance. While the DGAR worked closely with state and local officials on criminal investigations, they tended to be lengthy, similar to most criminal investigations in the country. Municipal and state officials generally were responsive in mediating disputes among religious groups; however, when a solution was not found, officials were usually not aggressive in pursuing legal remedies against offending local leaders. There were few investigations and prosecutions related to crimes rooted in religious intolerance.

The DGAR registered 77 new associations during the year, bringing the total to 7719. Most were evangelical Protestant (42), followed by Roman Catholic (24), and Baptist Evangelical (11).

Some non-Catholic religious groups reported difficulty in obtaining permission to transmit religious programming on commercial television and radio. Consequently, according to the nongovernment organization (NGO) Association for Religious Freedom, over 100 pirate radio stations broadcast evangelical Protestant programs throughout the country, the majority in Chiapas. The same NGO reported that the authorities continued to deny licenses to these stations, despite their having submitted the required documentation, thereby rendering the stations vulnerable to closure and their personnel to arrest.

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

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There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, frequently in small rural communities in the south. While religious differences were cited as the ostensible cause of such incidents, the disputes often were reported to have involved other factors, including ethnic differences, land disputes, and struggles over local political and economic power. Members of Buddhist, Jewish, and Mormon communities asserted they experienced little discrimination and few barriers to the practice of their religion, but several evangelical groups alleged that abuses and discrimination were frequent. Drought conditions exacerbated tensions over water rights between Mennonite and non-Mennonite farmers in the north of the country, leading to disputes, some of which turned violent.

In addition, there were reports of conflict between religious and secular communities. On October 18, authorities in Michoacan arrested Cruz Cardenas Salgado, the leader of a religious group in the community of New Jerusalem opposed to secular education. In July members of the group had destroyed public school buildings in the town, stating that their patron saint, the Virgin of the Rosary, told them the devil built the schools and that they should be demolished. Authorities tried to negotiate with the group to allow secular schools in the New Jerusalem community. However, in August the group blockaded teachers and students attempting to attend classes when the new school year started. The National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) announced that the community's refusal to allow grade school education, compulsory under Mexican law, violated the children's human rights. On December 3, approximately 50 members of the New Jerusalem community attempted to block the construction of a new school meant to replace the one burned down in July. In response, the government of Michoacan submitted criminal complaints against those who blocked the school's construction.

In the central and southern regions, some communities reportedly viewed evangelical groups as unwelcome outside influences and economic and political threats. Community leaders reportedly sometimes acquiesced to or ordered the harassment or expulsion of members of Protestant evangelical groups. The evangelical community reported that on June 14, a group of Catholics burned and destroyed 19 houses belonging to indigenous evangelical families in the community of Yashtinin, Chiapas in retaliation for the families' refusal to give up their evangelical faith and convert to Catholicism.

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Members of indigenous communities did not normally pay taxes and, instead, were expected to pay fees to community leaders, who arranged directly with the state to provide services. Because the traditional practice of collecting donations for community works and projects often included contributing to public events associated with the observance of Catholic holy days, some evangelicals in indigenous communities reported they refused to pay and were ostracized from their communities. There were instances of village leaders imposing sanctions on evangelicals for resisting participation in community festivals or refusing to work on Sundays. Evangelicals complained specifically of water and electricity cut-offs, expulsion from their villages and schools, loss of community rights and personal possessions, beatings, death threats, and the burning of their churches and homes.

According to the Central Committee for the Jewish Community in Mexico and the public affairs agency Tribuna Israelita, there were reports of anti-Semitic social media attacks on a number of prominent Mexican Jewish intellectuals and activists.

DGAR stated that as of November, it received 18 new reports of religious intolerance in the country during the year and that these conflicts were being resolved with state and municipal authorities. CONAPRED reported that as of October, it received seven new complaints of discrimination based on religion. With the goal of promoting social harmony, government officials, the president of the CNDH, and interfaith groups continued discussions about incidents of intolerance. The Mexico City Interfaith Council included representatives from a broad spectrum of religious groups. There were also interfaith councils in Chiapas, Nuevo Leon, and Yucatan.

The 2010 National Survey on Discrimination indicated that 29 percent of religious minorities believed that rejection, lack of acceptance, discrimination, and inequality were problems their communities faced. An additional 28 percent stated that the main problem facing their religious groups were intolerance, criticism, and lack of respect. Rejection, lack of acceptance, discrimination, and a perception of inequality regarding religious minorities were strongly perceived in Leon, Toluca and Turreon.

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

U.S. embassy and consulate representatives met with government officials for religious and indigenous affairs and human rights at the federal and state levels, raising cases of alleged abuses of evangelical Christians and discussing other

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religious freedom concerns. U.S. officials also sought different groups' views on the reform to Article 40 of the Constitution, adding the term 'secular' (*laico*) to the definition of the Mexican republic, and on pending reforms to Article 24, which would allow for religious services to take place "in public as well as private" places and would also add the term "freedom of ethical convictions" to the Constitution, intended to guarantee the freedom to have no religious faith.

Embassy officers also met with members of religious groups and religiously-affiliated NGOs. In particular, embassy officers met with leaders in the Jewish community to discuss increased social media threats and harassment of Jewish intellectuals and activists. The embassy raised concerns regarding increased anti-Semitism with CONAPRED, which in turn reported that it was actively engaged on the issue, meeting monthly with members of the Jewish community.

In February consulate officers in Juarez gave three presentations promoting religious diversity and human rights to high school and university student groups.