



Colombia

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. There is no state religion; however, the Roman Catholic Church retains a de facto privileged status.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. Terrorist organizations, especially the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), killed, kidnapped, and extorted religious leaders and practitioners, inhibiting free religious expression. Terrorist organizations generally targeted religious leaders and practitioners for political rather than religious reasons. The National Liberation Army (ELN) continued threatening members of religious organizations but generally adhered to its agreement to cease killing religious leaders. Paramilitary organizations, including the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), also targeted representatives and members of religious organizations. Some indigenous leaders reportedly were intolerant of nonsyncretic forms of worship.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 439,735 square miles and a population of 41.2 million. The Government does not keep official statistics on religious affiliation, and religious leaders cited different numbers. According to the Colombian Evangelical Council (CEDECOL), for example, approximately 12 percent of the population was Protestant, while the Catholic Bishops' Conference estimated that 90 percent of the population was Catholic. A March 22, 2007, article in the daily newspaper *El Tiempo* said that 80 percent of the population was Catholic (with the footnote that not all are active practitioners), 13.5 percent belonged to non-Catholic forms of Christianity, 2 percent were agnostic, and the remaining 4.5 percent belonged to other religious groups, such as Islam and Judaism. The Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Methodist Church had 261,000, and 1,500 members respectively. The Anglican Church and the Presbyterian Church had approximately 10,000 members each. Other Protestant and Evangelical Churches had an estimated 5 million followers. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) claimed less than 1,000 members. Other religious groups with a significant number of adherents included Judaism, estimated at between 7,000 and 8,000 families, Islam, with an estimated 10,000 followers, animism, and various syncretic belief systems.

Adherents of some religious groups are concentrated in specific geographical regions. For example, the vast majority of practitioners of syncretic beliefs that blend Catholicism with elements of African animism are Afro-Colombian residents in the western department of Choco. Jews are concentrated in major cities, Muslims on the Caribbean coast, and adherents of indigenous animistic religions in remote, rural areas. A small Taoist commune exists in a mountainous region of Santander Department.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution specifically prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The following Christian holy days are national holidays: Epiphany, Saint Joseph Day, Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good

Friday, Easter Sunday, the Ascension, Corpus Christi, Sacred Heart Day, Saints Peter and Paul Day, Feast of the Assumption, All Saints' Day, the Immaculate Conception, and Christmas.

The Constitution states that there is no official church or religion but adds that the state "is not atheist or agnostic, nor indifferent to Colombians' religious sentiment." Some interpret this to mean that the state unofficially sanctions a privileged position for Catholicism, which was the official religion until the adoption of the 1991 Constitution. A 1973 concordat between the Vatican and the Government remains in effect, although some of its articles are unenforceable because of constitutional provisions on freedom of religion. A 1994 constitutional court decision declared unconstitutional any official government reference to a religious characterization of the country.

The Government extends two different kinds of recognition to religious organizations: recognition as a legal entity (*personeria juridica*) and special public recognition as a religious entity. Although the application process is often lengthy, the Ministry of Interior and Justice (MOIJ) readily grants the former recognition; the only legal requirements are submission of a formal request and basic organizational information. In addition, any foreign religious group that wishes to establish a presence must document official recognition by authorities in its home country. The MOIJ may reject requests that do not comply fully with established requirements or that violate fundamental constitutional rights. Some non-Catholic religious leaders complained that their applications were unnecessarily delayed and that their petitions for recognition as a legal entity were denied for trivial reasons. They stated that for this reason, many non-Catholic religious groups chose not to apply for legal recognition and instead operated as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or as informal religious entities.

Since 1995 the MOIJ has approved 1,170 applications for special public recognition as a religious entity; an estimated 90 percent of the approvals were for evangelical churches. An April 2, 2007, article in *El Tiempo* quoted Bogotá's mayor as stating that there were now 700 non-Catholic places of worship in the capital city, compared to 450 Catholic churches. According to the MOIJ, 1,775 applications failed to meet constitutionally established requirements and thus were not approved. In cases in which individual churches or schools affiliated with a nationally registered church applied separately for special public recognition, the Government granted those organizations affiliate or associate status. More than 40 churches asked the Government to sponsor legislation establishing less exacting standards for special public recognition, formally codifying religious freedoms provided in the Constitution, and creating a special office for religious affairs. Although the MOIJ has statutory authority over recognizing religious entities, there is no government agency to monitor or enforce laws governing religious freedom.

Accession to a 1997 public law agreement between the state and non-Catholic religious groups is required for such organizations to minister to their adherents in public institutions such as hospitals or prisons, provide chaplaincy services and religious instruction in public schools, and perform marriages recognized by the state. When deciding whether to grant accession to the 1997 agreement, the Government considers a religious group's total membership, its degree of popular acceptance within society, and other relevant factors, such as the content of the organization's statutes and its required behavioral norms. At the end of the period covered by this report, 13 non-Catholic churches had been granted accession. No non-Christian religious group was a signatory to the 1997 public law agreement. Some prominent non-Christian religious groups, such as the Jewish community, sought not to accede to the 1997 public law, declaring that the agreement was designed for Protestant groups. Many churches that are signatories reported that some local authorities failed to comply with the accord.

The Ministry of Foreign Relations issues visas to foreign missionaries and religious administrators of the denominations that have received special public recognition. Foreign missionaries are required to possess a special visa, valid up to 2 years. Applicants must have a certificate from the MOIJ confirming that the religion is registered with the Ministry or a certificate issued by the Catholic archdioceses. Alternatively, they may produce a certificate issued by the religious organization itself confirming the applicant's membership and his mission in the country as well as a letter issued by a legal representative of the religious organization stating that the organization accepts full financial responsibility for the expenses of the applicant and his family, including his return to the country of origin or last country of residence. In both cases, applicants must explain the purpose of the proposed sojourn and provide proof of economic means. The Government generally permits missionaries to proselytize among the indigenous population, provided that the indigenous group welcomes proselytization and visitors do not induce members of indigenous communities to adopt changes that endanger their survival on traditional lands. A recent Supreme Court case stipulated that no group may force religious conversion on members of indigenous communities. Evangelical leaders said this decision was interpreted by local authorities as prohibiting proselytizing on indigenous lands. They claimed that local authorities forcefully removed missionaries from indigenous areas.

The Constitution recognizes parents' right to choose the type of education their children receive, including religious instruction. It also states that no student shall be forced to receive religious education in public schools. Religious groups that have not acceded to the public law agreement may establish their own schools, provided they comply with Ministry of Education requirements. For example, the Jewish community operates its own schools. The Catholic Church has an agreement with the Government to provide education in rural areas that have no state-operated schools. These schools are tax-exempt. Leaders of non-Catholic religious groups claimed that local authorities in many municipalities did not grant

their schools the same tax-exempt status enjoyed by the Catholic schools. These leaders also claimed that a decree by the Minister of Education to include education about religion in public schools was interpreted in many municipalities as a mandate to teach about Catholicism only, while offering no alternative instruction to students of other religious groups.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

Although the 1991 Constitution mandates the separation of church and state, the Catholic Church retains a de facto privileged status. Accession to the 1997 public law agreement is required for non-Catholic groups to minister to soldiers, public hospital patients, and prisoners and to provide religious instruction in public schools. However, Muslim and Protestant leaders claimed they faced difficulties in gaining military chaplain positions and access to prisoners. The state recognizes as legally binding only those religious marriages celebrated by the Catholic Church and the 13 non-Catholic religious organizations that are signatories to the 1997 public law agreement, as well as religious groups with an associated status to one of those signatories. Members of religious groups that are not signatories to the agreement must marry in a civil ceremony in order for the state to recognize the marriage. Some signatories to the agreement complained of discrimination at the local level, such as refusal by municipal authorities to recognize marriages performed by these groups. In addition, CEDECOL claimed that two state-operated television channels refused to allow evangelical groups to buy or receive airtime, while the Catholic Church received 2 minutes daily without cost.

All legally recognized churches, seminaries, monasteries, and convents are exempt from national and local taxes and customs duties. However, some non-Catholic religious groups reported that municipal governments required them to pay property and other local taxes on their places of worship and schools. The Colombian Evangelical Council claimed this tax-free status was not respected in practice. According to an April 2006 article in the daily newspaper *El Espectador*, the Treasury Department issued a decree requiring all non-Catholic places of worship to pay a tax of 4 percent on all tithes, offerings, and charitable contributions they received. According to CEDECOL, non-Catholic missionaries and religious leaders must also pay a tax of 35 percent on all financial assistance received from outside the country.

In October 2006 the Bogotá municipal government passed a city planning ordinance that restricted the number of churches in residential areas and placed stringent building codes on church facilities. CEDECOL claimed that if this ordinance is implemented in late 2007, it could result in the closure of 70 percent of the Protestant churches in the capital. Evangelical, Muslim, and Anglican leaders complained that the plan showed favoritism toward Catholicism, since many Catholic churches were historic monuments in central locations and were thus exempt from the proposal's requirements.

There were no developments in the case against the leaders of a small Taoist commune in Santander Department, who were accused of multiple killings, rape, extortion, kidnapping, and aiding paramilitary organizations from December 1998 to mid-2004.

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.

Anti-Semitism

There were isolated reports of anti-Semitism, including inflammatory statements in the media during the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel in the summer of 2006. On August 6, 2006, anti-Semitic graffiti was painted in the area around the Israeli Embassy in Bogotá.

Persecution by Terrorist Organizations

Religious leaders and practitioners were the targets of threats and kidnappings by guerrilla groups and former paramilitaries. The FARC, the AUC, and the ELN generally targeted religious leaders and practitioners for political or financial rather than religious reasons. These groups were responsible for the majority of such attacks and threats, killing, kidnapping, extorting, and inhibiting free religious expression. The Human Rights Unit of the Prosecutor General's Office continued to investigate the killings in past years of 14 members of the clergy believed to have been slain because they were outspoken critics of terrorist organizations.

The Presidential Program for Human Rights reported that nearly all killings of priests by terrorist groups could be attributed to leftist guerrillas, particularly the FARC. In the period since January 1, 2006, a human rights organization affiliated with the Mennonite church, Justicia, Paz y Acción Noviolenta (or Justapaz), registered 63 death threats from the FARC against members of religious communities. During the same period, Justapaz reported 47 such threats from the AUC. The same report indicated that the FARC was responsible for eight killings of religious leaders. Former paramilitaries were responsible for six such killings, and the ELN was responsible for one. In addition, the group documented 10 attempted killings, 8 of which were attributable to former paramilitaries. Justapaz recorded 103 religious community members as victims of forced displacement, 68 of which they attributed to former paramilitaries. Most of the remaining forced displacements were attributed to the FARC. The group documented the cases of six religious community members who were victims of torture, three of which they attributed to former paramilitaries.

Since July 1, 2004, according to the Catholic Bishops' Conference, terrorist groups have killed seven priests. Catholic and Protestant church leaders stated that killings of religious leaders in rural communities were generally underreported because of the communities' isolation and fear of retribution. Religious leaders generally chose not to seek government protection because of their pacifist beliefs and fear of retribution from terrorist groups. Justapaz and CEDECOL claimed that former paramilitaries and guerrillas equally committed violence against evangelical church leaders.

According to a March 11, 2007, article in *El Tiempo*, a Catholic priest, Yimy Torres, and a seminary student, Ramiro Prieto, were killed in their home in South Bogotá. Both were found bound with plastic bags tied over their heads and died of asphyxiation. Members of Torres' church commented that his sermons were very frank about problems in the country and this put him in danger. He reportedly told a member of his congregation that he had been threatened. The investigation by the Government was in the preliminary stages.

There was no information regarding the March 2006 killing of evangelical pastor Oscar Munoz Perea in Buenaventura, Valle de Cauca Department. Witnesses identified the killers as belonging to the AUC.

In September 2005 authorities captured FARC intelligence operative Omar Segundo Contreras Chamorro in Sucre Department. Contreras was wanted for his participation in the 2002 killing of Catholic priest Jose Luis Cardenas Fernandez. At the end of the period covered by this report, the trial was still in the preliminary investigative stage.

The body of Catholic priest Cesar Dario Pena had not been recovered at the end of the period covered by this report. In 2004 the FARC kidnapped him and in 2005 killed him, according to a captured FARC leader.

There were no developments regarding the 2005 killing of Catholic priest Jesus Adrian Sanchez in Tolima Department. According to the Catholic Bishops' Conference, the FARC killed Sanchez for his activism against the group's recruitment of child soldiers.

According to the Inter-Religious Task Force on Central America, in January 2006 the Reverend Milton Mejia and Mauricio Avilez of the Ecumenical Church Network of Colombia were threatened with death, apparently by former paramilitary personnel, because of their work defending the democratic and constitutional rights of victims of violence.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference reported that 64 Catholic churches were seriously damaged or destroyed in the last decade. Catholic churches generally were not attacked intentionally, but were often affected by nearby guerrilla attacks.

According to the Christian Union Movement, advances by government security forces against the FARC resulted in the reopening of approximately 350 of the more than 450 evangelical churches closed since 2002. All religious groups reported that due to threats from guerrillas or former paramilitaries, many religious authorities were forced to refrain from publicly discussing the country's internal conflict. Illegal armed groups, especially the FARC, threatened or attacked religious officials for opposing the forced recruitment of minors, promoting human rights, assisting internally displaced persons, and discouraging coca cultivation. The Catholic Bishops' Conference also reported that former paramilitaries and guerrillas issued death threats against rural priests who spoke out against them. In response to such threats, some religious leaders relocated to other communities.

Guerrillas or former paramilitaries harassed some indigenous groups that practiced animistic or syncretic religions. However, such harassment appeared generally motivated by political or economic differences (whether real or perceived) or by questions of land ownership rather than by religious concerns.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. The Catholic Church and some evangelical churches reported that some indigenous leaders were intolerant of nonsyncretic forms of worship.

According to CEDECOL, indigenous groups set fire to some Christian missionary churches on or near indigenous lands while people were inside the structures.

A number of faith-based nongovernmental organizations promoted human rights, social and economic development, and a negotiated settlement to the country's armed conflict. The most influential of these organizations were either affiliated with the Catholic Church or founded by Church officials. The Catholic Church continued to be the only institutional presence in many rural areas and conducted important social work through its Social Pastoral Agency.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy maintained regular communication with representatives of the Catholic Church and other religious groups.

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