



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Colombia

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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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 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. Paramilitary organizations, including the United Self Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC), also targeted representatives and members of religious organizations.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom, although some indigenous leaders reportedly were intolerant of nonsyncretic forms of worship.

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. Although the Government does not keep official statistics on religious affiliation, a June 22, 2006, article in the daily newspaper *El Pais* cited that 95 percent of the population was Catholic (with the footnote that not all are active practitioners of the faith), 3 percent was Protestant, and the remaining 2 percent belonged to other religions, such as Islam and Judaism. However, religious leaders cited different numbers. According to the Colombian Evangelical Council of Churches (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. According to data provided by their respective national headquarters, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses had 180,000, 130,000, and 110,000 members respectively, totaling approximately 1 percent of the population. Other religious faiths and movements with a significant number of adherents included Judaism, estimated at between 5,000 and 10,000, Islam, animism, and various syncretic belief systems.

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

Jewish leaders estimated that as many as one-third of their community had emigrated by the end of 2000. The principal cause was economic hardship caused by the country's recession, which resulted in increased violence against Jewish businesses. However, since the security situation has improved in recent years, members of the community have returned, although specific numbers were not available.

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 Day, Saint Joseph Day, Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter, 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 there is no official church or religion, but it 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 country's 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 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 Ministry of Interior and Justice may reject requests that do not comply fully with established requirements or that violate fundamental constitutional rights.

Since 1995 the Ministry of Interior and Justice has approved 787 of the 2,562 applications for special public recognition as a religious entity; an estimated 90 percent of the approvals were for evangelical churches. According to the ministry, 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 forty churches have asked the Government to sponsor legislation establishing less exacting standards for special public recognition and formally codifying religious freedoms provided for in the constitution. Although the Ministry of Interior and Justice 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, thirteen 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, have not sought to accede to the 1997 public law. 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 denominations that have received special public recognition. Foreign missionaries are required to possess a special visa, valid for a maximum of two years. Applicants must have either a certificate from the Ministry of Interior and Justice confirming that the religion is registered with the ministry or a certificate issued by the religious organization itself confirming the applicant's membership. In both cases, applicants must explain the purpose of the proposed sojourn and provide proof of economic means. The Government permits proselytizing among the indigenous population provided the indigenous group welcomes them and visitors do not induce members of indigenous communities to adopt changes that endanger their survival on traditional lands.

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. The Catholic Church and religious groups that have acceded to the 1997 public law agreement may provide religious instruction in public schools to students who wish to receive it, but students may opt out of sectarian religious instruction. Religious groups that have not acceded to the public law agreement may establish parochial 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. The schools are tax-exempt.

According to an October 2005 report in the daily newspaper *El Tiempo*, a Seventh-day Adventist student tried unsuccessfully to reach an agreement with her instructor for permission to miss a class on Friday evenings at a public school to practice her religion. After being dismissed from the class, the student filed suit in a regional level court, which subsequently backed the school's decision. However, the constitutional court overturned it on appeal and ordered the school to reenroll the student and accommodate her worship schedule.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Although the 1991 constitution mandated 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 thirteen non-Catholic churches that are signatories to the 1997 public law agreement. 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 have 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 two minutes daily without cost.

All legally recognized churches, seminaries, monasteries, and convents are exempt from national and local taxes and customs duties. However, some Protestant churches reported that municipal governments required them to pay property and other local taxes. Local governments may exempt religiously affiliated organizations such as schools and libraries. However, according to the Christian Union Movement, an association of evangelical Christian churches, only ten municipalities have exempted non-Catholic churches from local taxes.

Congress did not act on legislation, sponsored by the human rights ombudsman, that evangelical leaders said would limit their freedom of religious expression. However, the Bogota municipal government introduced a city planning proposal that would restrict the number of churches in residential areas and place stringent building codes on church facilities. CEDECOL claimed that such a regulation, to be applied retroactively, would close 70 percent of the 1,500 Protestant churches in the capital. Evangelical, Muslim, and Anglican leaders complained that the proposal showed favoritism toward Catholicism, since many Catholic churches are historic monuments in central locations and thus exempt from the proposal's requirements. In November 2005 national leaders from the Anglican, Muslim, Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist, and evangelical communities formed the Colombian Confederation of Religious and Conscience Freedom to encourage government

cooperation in strengthening religious freedom and combating the proposal.

There were setbacks 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. In May 2005 a suspect in custody thought to be one of the commune's principle leaders, Diego Leno Agudelo ("Saidamandan"), was released due to mistaken identity, and another suspect escaped from custody. At the end of the period covered by this report, neither suspect had been apprehended.

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.

Persecution by Terrorist Organizations

The FARC, the AUC, and the National Liberation Army guerilla group (ELN) generally targeted religious leaders and practitioners for political or financial, rather than religious, reasons. The FARC and the AUC were responsible for the majority of such attacks and threats, killing, kidnapping, extorting, and inhibiting free religious expression.

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. According to the Mennonite Church organization Justicia, Paz y Accion Noviolenta (or Justapaz) and CEDECOL's La Comision de Restauracion, Vida y Paz, at least 134 evangelical church leaders were killed in the past four years. According to the Catholic Bishops' Conference, terrorist groups have killed seven priests since 2003. 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. Justapaz and CEDECOL claimed that paramilitaries and guerrillas equally committed violence against evangelical church leaders but said the ELN leadership had agreed not to target evangelicals for political or religious reasons.

Religious leaders generally chose not to seek government protection because of their pacifist beliefs and fear of retribution from terrorist groups. Nevertheless, in response to the increased risks faced by church members, local citizens living near Catholic churches have set up more than 750 local security fronts to protect priests and officials. The national police designed the program following the 2002 assassination of Monsignor Isaias Duarte Cancino, the Catholic archbishop of Cali. The protection plan was not extended to include other religious groups.

In August 2005 Catholic priests Vicente Rozo Bayona and Ramon Emilio Mora were killed when their vehicle came under attack in Norte de Santander Department. The ELN later admitted responsibility for the killing, claiming they had mistaken the priests' vehicles for those used by paramilitaries, and apologized for the killings.

In August 2005 in Tolima Department, gunmen pulled Catholic priest Jesus Adrian Sanchez from a classroom and shot him in front of his students. According to the Catholic Bishops' Conference, the FARC killed Sanchez for his activism against the group's recruitment of child soldiers. Caracol television news later reported that FARC leader "Mono Jojoy" had ordered his troops to "kill all pastors." The television report indicated that Sanchez's killing was part of this FARC campaign, based on a taped conversation obtained from a FARC deserter.

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.

Catholic priest Cesar Dario Pena, whom the FARC kidnapped in 2004, was reportedly killed in September 2005, according to a captured a FARC leader; however, a body had not been recovered at the end of the period covered by this report.

In January 2006 a court sentenced FARC commander John Fredy Jimenez and hired gunman Alexander de Jesus Zapata for their role in the 2002 killing of Archbishop Isaias Duarte. Jimenez and Zapata were sentenced to thirty-five years and thirty-six years, respectively.

In March 2006 evangelical pastor Oscar Munoz Perea was shot and killed in Buenaventura, Valle de Cauca Department. Witnesses identified the killers as belonging to the AUC.

In May 2006 *El Colombiano*, a Medellin-based daily newspaper, reported that the body of Catholic priest Javier Francisco Montoya had been found and identified. The FARC, who kidnapped Montoyo in Choco Department in 2004 and later killed him, had previously refused to hand over the body.

There were no developments in the case of the FARC's killing of three persons in Puerto Asis, Putumayo Department, in 2004. Justapaz claimed, however, that the FARC was threatening a witness to the massacre.

The Human Rights Unit of the Prosecutor General's Office continued to investigate the killings in past years of fourteen members of the clergy believed to have been slain because they were outspoken critics of terrorist organizations.

Religious leaders and practitioners were the targets of threats and kidnappings by guerrilla groups and paramilitaries. Five members of the religious organization Justicia y Paz in Choco Department kidnapped in April 2005 were liberated fifteen days after they were initially

captured. Justicia y Paz said the incident was a case of mistaken identity.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference reported that sixty-four Catholic churches had been seriously damaged or destroyed in the last decade. Catholic churches generally were not attacked intentionally, but often they were affected by guerrilla attacks on police stations and mayors' offices located nearby.

According to the Christian Union Movement, advances by government security forces against the FARC have resulted in the reopening of approximately 350 of the more than 450 evangelical churches closed since 2002. However, guerrillas and paramilitaries continued to attack rural evangelical churches and schools because they suspected the churches were fronts for U.S. government activities. Mormon Church leaders and facilities remained under threat for the same reason.

Due to threats from guerrillas or 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 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 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

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. The Catholic Church and some evangelical churches reported that some indigenous leaders were intolerant of nonsyncretic forms of worship.

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.

There were isolated reports of anti-Semitism, including graffiti painted on exterior walls of synagogues. Anti-Semitic statements in pamphlets and books published by small xenophobic organizations also were distributed and sold on limited scales. The Government condemned these acts and worked with members of the Jewish community to investigate the incidents, although laws guaranteeing freedom of expression have impeded actions against the publishers. Jewish leaders stated that relations between the Government and the Jewish and Muslim communities were generally stronger than those between the government and the evangelical community. The Jewish community has taken a number of steps to combat anti-Semitism by advancing dialogue with other religious groups and by holding educational forums on Judaism at Christian churches, private and public schools, and universities.

In May 2006 the Catholic cardinal of Bogota threatened to excommunicate five constitutional court justices for voting to partially decriminalize abortion. However, at the end of the period covered by this report, the Catholic Church had not taken such action.

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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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)