



El Salvador

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 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.

There were no 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 8,108 square miles; preliminary data from the 2007 census indicates that the population is 5.8 million. The country is predominantly Roman Catholic, with a sizeable Protestant minority, plus small communities of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Hare Krishna, Muslims, and Jews, among others. A very small segment of the population observes indigenous religious practices.

According to an October 2006 survey by the Technological University Public Opinion Center, 48 percent of the population was Roman Catholic. (There are diverse religious views among Catholics groups, including a Charismatic Renewal group that, according to press reports, constitutes more than 6 percent of Catholics.) Some 28.2 percent are members of Protestant churches. (Among Protestants, informal church estimates suggest that approximately 35 percent are Baptists and members of Assemblies of God.) Groups that constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons; 14.6 percent are not affiliated with any religious group.

Several missionary groups are active.

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 states that all persons are equal before the law and prohibits discrimination based on nationality, race, sex, or religion.

In March 2007 the Government denied entry to Jose Luis Miranda, who claimed to be the antichrist and whose church is not registered with the Government. In 2006 Miranda created a public disturbance when he carried out public rituals in front of the National Cathedral, destroying Catholic images and burning Bibles. On April 26, 2007, the Legislative Assembly voted unanimously to amend article 296 of the Penal Code to impose criminal sentences (6 months to 2 years) on those who publicly offend or insult the religious beliefs of others, or who damage or destroy religious objects. If such acts are carried out with and for the purpose of publicity, sentences increase to 1 to 3 years in prison. Repeat offenders face prison sentences of 3 to 6 years, and in cases where further infractions are repeated "with publicity," a maximum penalty of 8 years in prison can be imposed.

The Constitution requires the president, cabinet ministers and vice ministers, Supreme Court justices, judges, governors,

attorney general, public defender, and other senior government officials to be laypersons. In addition the electoral code requires judges of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal and members of municipal councils to be laypersons.

A 1940 law established Holy Week holidays for public employees, and each year the Legislative Assembly issues a decree establishing Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday as official holidays for the private sector.

The Constitution explicitly recognizes the Roman Catholic Church and grants it special legal status. In addition the law governing nonprofit organizations and foundations states that such groups may register for official status; although not required to register with the Government, a group must do so if it wants to incorporate formally. The civil code gives equal status to churches as nonprofit foundations. For formal recognition, they must apply through the Office of the Director General for Nonprofit Associations and Foundations (DGFASFL) within the Ministry of Governance. Each group must present a constitution and bylaws that describe, among other things, the type of organization, location of offices, goals and principles, requirements for membership, type and function of ruling bodies, and assessments or dues. Before the DGFASFL can grant registration, it must determine that the group's constitution and bylaws do not violate the law. Once a group is registered, notice of DGFASFL approval and the group's constitution and bylaws must be published in the official gazette.

The law for nonprofit organizations and foundations charges the Ministry of Governance with registering, regulating, and overseeing the finances of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), non-Catholic churches, and other religious groups. The law specifically exempts unions, cooperatives, and the Catholic Church from this registration requirement. During the period covered by this report, there were 130 requests for new registration, of which 56 were approved, 72 were pending, and 2 lacked the necessary documentation for approval.

Regulations implementing the tax law grant tax-exempt status to recognized non-Catholic churches and other religious groups. The regulations also make donations to recognized churches tax-deductible.

Noncitizens who are in the country primarily to proselytize must obtain a special residence visa for religious activities and are not allowed to proselytize while on a visitor or tourist visa.

Public education is secular. Private religious schools operate freely. All private schools, whether religious or secular, must meet the same standards to achieve Ministry of Education approval.

The President attends different religious ceremonies to promote interfaith understanding.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

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 no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. In 2006 Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders founded the Council of Religions for Peace. Leaders of the Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, evangelical, Islamic, Jewish, and Buddhist religious groups participated.

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 continued to maintain a regular dialogue with principal religious leaders, church officers, church-sponsored universities, and NGOs.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)