



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

El Salvador

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

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 during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

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 and an estimated population of approximately 6.7 million. The country was 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 practiced an indigenous religion.

According to a 2003 survey by the Technological University Public Opinion Center, approximately 57.1 percent of the population was Roman Catholic. Additionally, 21.2 percent were members of Protestant churches. (Among Protestants, informal church estimates suggested approximately 35 percent were Baptists and members of Assemblies of God.) Members of Jehovah's Witnesses accounted for an estimated 1.9 percent of the population, 0.7 percent were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2.3 percent were associated with other churches and religious groups, and 16.8 percent were not affiliated with any church or religion.

Several missionary groups were active, including Mormon, Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, and Assembly of God.

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.

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 as 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 legal status. In addition, the law governing nonprofit organizations and foundations states that such groups may register for official status. A religious group is not required to register with the Government but 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 to a group, 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 government 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 in the country. The law specifically exempts unions, cooperatives, and the Catholic Church. During the period covered by this report, there were 118 requests for new registration, of which 94 were approved, 22 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 seeking actively to promote a church or religion must obtain a special residence visa for religious activities. Visitors to the country are not allowed to proselytize while on a visitor or tourist visa. There were no allegations of difficulties in obtaining visas for religious activities during the period covered by this report.

Public education is secular. Private religious schools operate freely in the country. All private schools, whether religious or secular, must meet the same standards to be approved by the Ministry of Education.

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

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to the free practice of religion. On January 23, 2006, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders founded the Council of Religions for Peace. Leaders of the Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, evangelical, Muslim, 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. During the period covered by this report, the embassy sponsored three U.S. scholars in their studies of the small Jewish community, the Anglican Church and its work in social justice, and Catholic religious artwork in the country.

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