



## Mexico

### International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions at the local level.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report.

There were some reports of societal abuses, usually in small, rural communities in the south. Most such incidents occurred in the states of Chiapas, Guerrero, and Oaxaca. Government officials, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and evangelical and Roman Catholic representatives agreed that the roots of these conflicts sometimes lay in a combination of political, ethnic, or land disputes which were often connected to the traditional "practices and customs" of indigenous communities.

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 1,220,663 square miles and a population of 107 million.

According to the Government's 2000 census, approximately 88 percent of respondents identify themselves as at least nominally Catholic. There are an estimated 11,000 Catholic churches and 14,000 Catholic priests and nuns. An additional estimated 90,000 laypersons worked in the Catholic Church. Other religious groups for which the 2000 census provides estimates include evangelicals (Pentecostals, neo-Pentecostals, and Pentecostal Roots, which in turn include Live God Church, Truth Column and Support, and the World's Light), with 1.71 percent of the population; other Protestant evangelical groups, 2.79 percent; members of Jehovah's Witnesses, 1.25 percent; "historical" Protestants (defined by the Government as Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, Nazarene, Mennonite, and others), 0.71 percent; Seventh-day Adventists, 0.58 percent; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 0.25 percent; Jews, 0.05 percent; and other religions, 0.31 percent. Approximately 3.52 percent of respondents indicated "no religion," and 0.86 percent did not specify a religion.

The General Director for Religious Associations of the Federal Secretariat of Government (GDAR) registered 3,472 evangelical and 80 traditional Protestant associations by the end of the reporting period. The exact number of evangelical and Protestant churches and pastors is unknown, and statistics on membership remain scant. Official figures sometimes differed from membership claims of religious groups. For example, the Seventh-day Adventist Church claim a nationwide membership of 600,000 to 700,000 persons; however, according to the 2000 census, only 488,945 persons identify themselves as such. Also according to the 2000 census, 205,229 persons identify themselves as Mormons, whereas the Mormon Church claims a nationwide membership of approximately 1.2 million.

Non-Catholic Christians are concentrated primarily in the south. In Chiapas, 21.9 percent of respondents in the 2000 census identify themselves as Protestant; however, some Protestant evangelical groups claim that their coreligionists constituted a much higher percentage of the population.

The Jewish community claims approximately 50,000 members; by far the largest number lives in Mexico City, although there also are organized congregations in Guadalajara, Monterrey, Tijuana, and Cancun. There is a small Muslim population in the city of Torreón, Coahuila, and there are an estimated 300 Muslims in the San Cristobal de las Casas area in Chiapas. Some indigenous people in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Yucatán practice a syncretic religion that mixes Catholic and pre-Hispanic Mayan religious beliefs.

In some communities, particularly in the south, there is a correlation between politics and religion. A small number of local leaders often reportedly manipulate religious tensions in their communities for their own political or economic benefit, particularly in Chiapas.

## 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. State and municipal governments generally protected this right; however, local community leaders, particularly in the south, infringed on religious freedom, using religion as a pretext for conflicts related to political, ethnic, or land disputes.

The Constitution states that all persons are free to profess their chosen religious belief and to practice its 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. 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. The 1992 Law on Religious Associations and Public Worship defines the administrative remedies that protect the right to religious freedom. In 2001 a provision was added to the Constitution that establishes a prohibition against any form of discrimination, including discrimination against persons on the basis of religion.

The law permits religious groups to operate informally without registering with the Government. However, if a religious community wishes to take on a legal personality, which is necessary for it to enter into contracts and purchase or rent land, it must register with the GDAR as a religious association. The registration process is routine. The most recent statistics showed that 6,661 religious associations were registered, of which the majority were evangelical Protestant or Catholic. During the period covered by this report, the GDAR registered 155 associations, some of which had applied for registration previously. In addition, at the end of the period covered by this report, 207 applications either awaited further supporting documentation or were not in compliance with registration criteria.

To be registered as a religious association, 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 apply for official building permits, receive tax exemptions, and hold religious meetings outside of their places of worship. Religious associations must notify the Government of their intent to hold a religious meeting outside of a licensed place of worship. Thousands of notifications are typically submitted every year, and the Government routinely approves such requests. Religious associations may not hold any sort of political meeting.

The GDAR promotes religious tolerance and investigates cases of religious intolerance. All religious associations have equal access to the GDAR for registering complaints. The GDAR has translated the Religious Associations Law into 9 indigenous languages, with the intention of completing a total of 16. Its officials generally are responsive and helpful in mediating disputes among religious communities. When parties present a religious dispute to the GDAR, it attempts to mediate a solution. If mediation fails, the parties may submit the problem to the GDAR for binding arbitration. If the parties do not agree to this procedure, one or the other may elect to seek judicial redress. Municipal and state officials generally are responsive and helpful in mediating disputes among communities. However, when a mediated solution cannot be found, officials have not always been aggressive in pursuing legal remedies against offending local leaders (see Section III).

The Federal Government coordinates religious affairs through the Ministry of Interior. Three states—Chiapas, Guerrero, and Nuevo León—have their own under secretaries for religious affairs. Other states have specific offices dedicated to religious affairs, including: Campeche, Coahuila, Chihuahua, State of Mexico, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, Michoacán, Morelos, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Puebla, San Luis Potosí, Sinaloa, Tabasco, Veracruz, and Zacatecas.

Of 8 official holidays, Christmas Day is the only Christian holy day. Most employers give holiday leave on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, All Souls' Day, Virgin of Guadalupe Day, and Christmas Eve.

The Government requires religious groups to apply for a permit to construct new buildings or convert existing buildings into houses of worship. Religious groups reported no difficulty in obtaining government permission for these activities. Any religious building constructed after 1992 is the property of the religious association that built it. All religious buildings erected before 1992 are classified as national patrimony and owned by the state and exempt from taxes.

According to the law, religious groups may not own or administer broadcast radio or television stations. Government permission is required to transmit religious programming on commercial broadcast radio or television, and the Government routinely grants permission.

The Constitution provides that public education must be secular, but religious associations are free to maintain private schools. Primary-level homeschooling for religious reasons is not explicitly prohibited or supported by the law; however, to enter a secondary school, one must have attended an accredited primary school. Homeschooling is allowed at the secondary level after schooling at an accredited primary school has been completed.

The work of religious clergy in public institutions such as jails or hospitals is neither explicitly prohibited nor supported by law.

Missionaries are present. Although the Federal Government limits the number of visas each religious group is allowed, the application procedure is routine and uncomplicated.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Federal Government generally respects religious freedom in practice. However, poor enforcement mechanisms allowed community leaders in Chiapas and several other states to discriminate against persons based on their religious beliefs. Federal and local governments often failed to punish those responsible for acts of religiously motivated violence.

According to press reports, in April 2007 in the village of Tzotzil Maya, Zinacatan Municipality in the State of Chiapas, local authorities jailed Juan Mendez 2 days after his conversion, where they threatened to strip and beat him. The next morning he was released without being charged, but the evangelical community felt threatened by this incident.

The director of the Lázaro Cárdenas Teachers College in Arteaga, Michoacán, suspended six student teachers who were Jehovah's Witnesses, alleging that they lacked sufficient patriotic fervor. On February 7, 2007, four of the students appealed to the federal court; the case was pending at the end of the reporting period. On September 26, 2006, a trial court upheld the suspension of another student, in contrast to recommendations issued by the National Commission of Human Rights. In May 2006 another student appealed to the federal court regarding the nature of the authority of the school officials. The court decided in the student's favor, and he subsequently appealed the suspension in federal court; his case was pending also.

Local authorities in Xocotlán, Texcoco Municipality of the State of Mexico, pressed evangelical church-goers to contribute financially to local celebrations and for repairs of the church's cupola, threatening them with suspension of potable water services if they did not. In January 2007 the GDAR learned about this issue and was informed by the State of Mexico that in June 2007 there was a negotiated settlement allowing the evangelicals to freely practice their religion without community pressure.

In late 2006 in Chicviltenal, Chiapas, three students were allegedly expelled from their elementary school because their parents were Protestants. News reports alleged that the students' parents were jailed for 15 hours and fined for practicing an evangelical religion. The State Directorate for Religious Affairs stated that it was not specifically aware of this case but reported that two evangelicals were jailed in that community and then immediately released. On November 30, 2006, the evangelicals signed an agreement completed under the indigenous system of "practices and customs" stating they would not proselytize their religion without authorization from authorities. This agreement was not authorized by local, state, or federal officials. The State Directorate for Religious Affairs stated that it would try to prevent future occurrences of this sort.

Abbot Avelino Solano, a member of an evangelical family in the community of Pascala del Oro, in the San Luis Acatlán Municipality of Guerrero, was jailed and his family threatened with expulsion. The GDAR reported that he was jailed by community leaders for failing to fulfill work responsibilities rather than for his religious beliefs.

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 some reports of social abuses, usually in small, rural communities in the south. Religious differences frequently were the cited cause of such incidents; however, the disputes often involved several underlying factors, including ethnic differences, land disputes, and struggles over local political and economic power.

In the central and southern regions, some leaders of predominantly Catholic indigenous communities regarded evangelical groups as unwelcome outside influences and as economic and political threats. These leaders sometimes acquiesced in or ordered the harassment or expulsion of individuals belonging chiefly to Protestant evangelical groups. As in previous reporting periods, village leaders imposed sanctions on evangelicals for resisting participation in community festivals or refusing to work on Sundays. Common complaints by evangelicals included local leaders cutting off the water supply or being denied benefits from government programs because of their religion.

This was particularly common in Chiapas, where many residents follow a unique and centuries-old syncretistic mix of Catholicism and native custom (Catholic-Mayan). Endemic poverty, land tenure disputes, and lack of educational opportunities also contributed to tensions, which at times resulted in violence.

Evangelicals often resisted making financial donations demanded by community norms that served partly to fund local festivals typically occurring on Catholic holidays and often involving alcohol. The National Bar of Christian Lawyers reported 200 cases of unresolved religious intolerance against evangelical Christians in Chiapas.

On April 14, 2007, a Pentecostal church was reportedly destroyed in Ollas, San Juan Chamula Municipality in the State of Chiapas. The State Directorate for Religious Affairs reported that evangelical families lacked a permit to build the church, of which they had only recently begun construction. It also stated that the San Juan Chamula Municipality designated 130 locations expressly for evangelicals.

On March 7, 2007, the newspaper El Pueblo published a statement that five evangelical families of the community of Huehuetepec, in the Atlamajalcingo del Monte Municipality of Guerrero, would be expelled from the town by community leaders for refusing to participate in community services, such as road work and the construction and painting of community buildings.

On February 10, 2007, in Chiepetlán, Guerrero, the community assembly expelled three evangelical families for refusing to participate in obligatory community service and for "infringing on" the customs of the town. The GDAR characterized this as a land dispute and organized negotiations with the aim of peacefully resolving the dispute.

According to the GDAR, on January 31, 2007, in San Juan Chamula Municipality in the State of Chiapas, shots were fired at three evangelicals driving home from San Cristobal de las Casas, allegedly because of their religious affiliation. They required hospitalization.

In January 2007, according to news reports, local community leaders (caciques) in Los Pozos in the State of Chiapas, suspended electrical and water utilities of more than 65 evangelicals and threatened to expel them from their homes. Following an agreement on April 23, the local community leaders ceased forcing the evangelicals to make donations towards the community festivals, which involved alcohol and which the evangelicals considered pagan and idolatrous. However, despite signed agreements with the officials of the Huixtan Municipality and the State of Chiapas, the evangelicals reportedly were still without electricity and water at the end of the reporting period. Also in Los Pozos, the La Jornada newspaper reported that at least 10 evangelicals did not receive the benefits due them under the agricultural Program of Direct Rural Support (PROCAMPO) because of their religious affiliation. The State Directorate for Religious Affairs reported that an interagency state commission facilitated dialogue between the evangelicals and community leaders, and on April 15, 2007, signed an agreement in which the parties established the freedom of religious belief and mutual respect, including for the community's practices and customs.

According to the GDAR, on November 27, 2006, community leaders in Ahuetetla, in the Tepehuacan de Guerrero Municipality in the state of Hidalgo, threatened evangelical parishioners with physical attack and the suspension of power and water services if they continued their religious meetings and did not participate in the town's Catholic celebrations.

Members of the National Bar of Christian Lawyers reported that Rodolfo Lopez Velazco and his family were displaced from their community, located in Tierra Blanca, in the Ocosingo Municipality of Chiapas, for holding non-Catholic religious beliefs. Their house was burned and their land destroyed.

The religious association, Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, reported that persons from the town of San Miguel Acuexcomac, in the San Juan Tzicatlacoyan Municipality of Puebla, prevented a group of Jehovah's Witnesses from visiting the town to proselytize. The town's Catholic priest allegedly sought to expel them from the community if their attempts continued.

Every year since 1994, traditionalist local leaders in Chiapas have denied approximately 150 children access to the local public schools in 6 indigenous communities because they are evangelicals. The students receive instruction in separate classrooms under a program that began in 2001 to provide education for children who are marginalized due to their religious affiliation.

In the state of Oaxaca, local leaders expelled members of Jehovah's Witnesses and destroyed their place of worship. From August to September 2006, many returned home after a change in the leadership of the area and the State Commission of Human Rights' official recommendation safeguarding their right to religious freedom. In October 2006, however, the Jehovah's Witnesses were instructed to go to a meeting in San Miguel Reyes in Putla de Guerrero, where they were arrested for no apparent reason. Upon their release by the Public Ministry, they chose not to return to their former homes. When state authorities later enforced the official recommendation, they returned and resumed their worship services.

In Nuevo Jerusalem, Michoacán, 150 families and 31 religious leaders of the town's religious group were threatened with expulsion from the community by October 7, 2006, if they did not accept Agapito Gomez Aguilar, accused of rape and murder, as their leader; however, they were not expelled and remained in the community. The GDAR reported this was not a religious conflict, but rather an internal group dispute over control of the community.

While state government officials claimed to have resolved the March 2005 conflict between Catholics and Protestants in the town of Zinacantan, Chiapas, civil society members disagreed and reported that an inclination towards violence persisted. On August 22, 2006, tensions emerged again during the gubernatorial campaign. According to media reports, groups of Catholics and Protestants, allegedly associated with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), respectively, clashed when Protestant parents were reportedly not allowed to participate in election-day festivities. A PRD-linked Protestant reportedly shot and killed a PRI-linked Catholic; two persons were injured, and several members of both groups were detained. The State Directorate for Religious Affairs attributed the events to social and political rather than religious tensions. Four persons remained in jail, and the case was pending at the end of the reporting period.

In July 2006 in San Juan Chamula, Chiapas, the media reported that PRI-affiliated Catholics allegedly destroyed an illegally constructed evangelical church that was attended by members of the PRD. The PRI-affiliated group threatened to expel or kill eight evangelical families if they attempted to rebuild. On July 28, according to state officials, the parties involved resolved the dispute and signed an agreement to respect local authority and religious freedom.

On October 25, 2005, Catholic priest Luis Velasquez Romero was bound and killed in Tijuana. The reason for the killing was not determined, but the GDAR stated this did not involve a religious conflict. The assassin, who himself was killed as a result of drug-related violence in May 2007, was neither apprehended nor charged.

The State Attorney General and State Directorate for Religious Affairs ruled that the case of two men detained for the 2003 killing of evangelical Christian pastor Mariano Diaz Mendez, near the town of San Juan Chamula in Chiapas, involved a personal dispute rather than religious intolerance. The State Directorate for Religious Affairs stated that Sebastian and Manuel Jimenez Lopez were sentenced to 25 years for Mendez's murder. They were serving their sentence in a prison in Cintalapa Municipality in the State of Chiapas.

The GDAR stated that during the reporting period, it had received 9 new reports of conflicts related to religious intolerance and that 14 pending conflicts had been resolved. Government officials, the national human rights ombudsman, and interfaith groups continued to conduct discussions about incidents of intolerance in order to promote social peace. The Mexico City Interfaith Council included representatives from the Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Mormon, Lutheran, other Protestant, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh Dharma, and Sufi Islam communities. Interfaith councils were also established in Chiapas, Nuevo León, and the Yucatán.

#### 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. U.S. embassy representatives discussed these issues with government offices for religious and indigenous affairs and human rights at federal and state levels. Embassy officers also met with members of religious groups and nongovernmental organizations.

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