



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Mexico

#### 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; however, there were some restrictions at the local level in certain areas.

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 Federal Government continued to strengthen efforts to promote interfaith understanding and dialogue and to mediate cases of religious intolerance.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom; however, in certain areas, particularly in the south, political, cultural, and religious tensions continued to limit the free practice of religion within some communities. Most such incidents occurred in the state of Chiapas, but government officials, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and evangelical and Roman Catholic representatives agreed that the roots of these conflicts sometimes lay in political, ethnic, or land disputes.

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 approximately 107 million.

According to the Government's 2000 census, approximately 88 percent of respondents identified themselves as at least nominally Roman Catholic. There were an estimated 11,000 Catholic churches and 14,000 ordained Catholic priests and nuns. An additional estimated 90,000 laypersons worked in the Catholic Church system. Other religious groups for which the 2000 census provided estimates included evangelicals (including Pentecostals, neopentecostals, and Pentecostal Roots, which in turn included 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, Del Nazareno, Mennonites, 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.

There were no definitive statistics on membership in various Protestant denominations. A 2000 press report indicated that Presbyterians accounted for 1 percent of the total population, Anglicans 0.1 percent, Baptists 0.1 percent, Methodists 0.04 percent, and Lutherans 0.01 percent. Official figures sometimes differed from membership claims of religious groups. For example, the Seventh-day Adventist Church claimed a nationwide membership of 600,000 to 700,000 persons; however, according to the 2000 census, only 488,945 persons identified themselves as such. Also according to the 2000 census, 205,229 persons identified themselves as Mormons, whereas the Mormon Church claimed a nationwide membership of approximately 1.2 million. Some Protestant evangelical groups claimed that their coreligionists constituted close to 60 percent of the population in Chiapas; however, in the 2000 census only 21.9 percent of respondents in that state identified themselves as Protestant. The exact number of evangelical and Protestant churches and pastors was unknown, but as of May 31, 2006, the Director for Religious Associations of the Federal Secretariat of Government (DAR) had registered 3,404 evangelical and 79 Protestant associations.

Non-Catholic Christians were concentrated primarily in the south. Chiapas State, with a large indigenous population and approximately 4 percent of the country's population, had the largest percentage of non-Catholics, 36.2 percent, compared to the national average, estimated at 12 percent. Non-Catholics represented 29.6 percent of the population of Tabasco State, followed by Campeche State with 28.7 percent, and Quintana Roo State with 26.8 percent.

The Jewish community claimed approximately 50,000 members; by far the largest number lived in Mexico City, although there also were organized congregations in Guadalajara, Monterrey, Tijuana, and Cancun. There was a small Muslim population in the city of Torreon, Coahuila, and there were an estimated 300 Muslims in the San Cristobal de las Casas area in Chiapas. Some indigenous people in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Yucatan practiced a syncretic religion that mixed Catholic and pre-Hispanic Mayan religious beliefs.

In some communities, particularly in the south, there was a correlation between politics and religion. A small number of local leaders often reportedly manipulated 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 Federal Government generally respected this right in practice; however, there were some restrictions. State and municipal governments generally protected this right, but some local officials, 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 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 DAR as a religious association. The registration process is routine. The most recent statistics showed that 6,585 religious associations were registered, of which the vast majority were evangelical Protestant or Catholic. During the period covered by this report, the DAR registered 213 associations, some of which had applied for registration previously. In addition, at the end of the period covered by this report, 360 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.

In April 2005 the DAR revoked the registry of MEX-USA for changing its statutes, the first revocation since the establishment of the law of religious associations. While having originally registered as a Catholic organization, MEX-USA later incorporated members who worshipped the Saint of Death (*Santa Muerte*). During the period covered by this report, the members of the organization continued to meet and worship informally as an unregistered religious group.

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, which the DAR fined in April 2005 for profiting from its activities, continued to operate, although it reportedly no longer conditioned promises of salvation on the receipt of donations in particular amounts.

The DAR promotes religious tolerance and investigates cases of religious intolerance. All religious associations have equal access to the DAR for registering complaints. Its officials generally are responsive and helpful in mediating disputes among religious communities. When parties present a religious dispute to the DAR, it attempts to mediate a solution. If mediation fails, the parties may submit the problem to the DAR 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).

Five states--Chiapas, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Veracruz, and Mexico State--have their own under secretaries for religious affairs. In Nuevo Leon the position of Under Secretary for Citizens' Services includes Religious Affairs as part of the portfolio.

Of eight 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.

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.

Missionaries representing a wide variety of groups were 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

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

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. The Government routinely approves such requests.

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.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Federal Government generally respects religious freedom in practice; however, poor enforcement mechanisms allowed local authorities 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. In parts of Chiapas, leaders of indigenous communities sometimes regarded evangelical groups and Catholic lay catechists as unwelcome outside influences and as potential economic and political threats. As a result, these leaders sometimes acquiesced in or ordered the harassment or expulsion of individuals belonging chiefly to Protestant evangelical groups. The DAR estimated that 15 percent of reported religious conflicts--115 since the beginning of the Fox administration in 2000--were abuses by local authorities. Often these authorities were unpaid officials of small, rural municipalities. Religious differences frequently were the cited feature of such incidents; however, the disputes frequently involved several underlying factors, including ethnic differences, land disputes, and struggles over local political and economic power. In past years, expulsions involved burning of homes and crops, beatings, and, occasionally, killings. During the period covered by this report, there were no known deaths in incidents that had a religious dimension. These incidents usually occurred in predominantly Catholic-Mayan communities, and they mostly involved Catholics harassing or abusing evangelicals or other Protestants. On several occasions, village officials imposed sanctions on evangelicals for resisting participation in community festivals or refusing to work on Saturdays.

The Chiapas-based Evangelical Commission for the Defense of Human Rights (CEDEH) claimed that municipal authorities have expelled 30,000 persons from their communities in the last thirty years. Some of these persons were displaced at least partly on religious grounds. A representative from the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) reported that there were no official statistics on the displaced. However, the *Diagnostic on Human Rights in Mexico*, published in 2003 by the representative of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, cited religious conflict as one of the principal reasons for internal displacement in Chiapas.

In August 2005 members of the Huichol ethnic group belonging to the Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist, and Apostolic Churches were driven from their homes in the community of Agua Fria, Mezquitic Municipality, Jalisco. Village leaders charged that evangelicals did not follow community by-laws, which require partaking in native religious practices, including the use of liquor and peyote. Most Huichol practiced these native customs alongside Catholicism. According to press reports, at least 120 persons fled their homes and sought refuge in the neighboring state of Nayarit. According to the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples, many of those who fled settled in Nayarit permanently, while others intended to return to their village in Jalisco. Local authorities in Jalisco denied charges of religious intolerance and referred to the conflict as a land dispute.

In October 2005 an estimated forty families (approximately 150 persons) were threatened with expulsion from the village of San Nicolas, Ixmiquilpan Municipality, in the state of Hidalgo, allegedly for defying the "customs of th[e] town." According to press reports, during an August 28 town assembly it was decided not to permit evangelicals in the town. In November the governor of Hidalgo and officials from the Secretariat of Government met with representatives of the evangelical families and publicly reassured them of their safety and right to remain. Although a formal resolution had not been reached by the end of the period covered by this report, tension in the community had decreased, and newly elected local officials were reportedly more accommodating of religious differences. While a dispute concerning official permission for the construction of an evangelical church had not been resolved, construction materials were reportedly located at the building site.

According to a Chiapas newspaper, *Cuarto Poder*, in November 2005 an evangelical leader in Santa Rita, La Trinitaria Municipality, denounced a series of attacks on local evangelicals, including assaults, vandalism, and land seizures. A representative of Jehovah's Witnesses reported that one of its members in Santa Rita had been incarcerated on several occasions for not participating in Catholic feast days. Local authorities seized his farmland, distributed it to other villagers, and threatened to evict him from the community. The State Directorate for Religious Affairs in Chiapas, however, categorized this situation as a land dispute, and legal proceedings were underway to resolve the problem.

By the end of the period covered by this report, the Tojolabal Christian families who fled their homes in 2004 after being attacked by a mob including local officials linked to the Democratic Revolution Party had not returned. The families joined approximately 300 to 400 Tojolabal Christians expelled from their farms in Las Margaritas Township in the previous ten months.

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 religious freedom; however, there continued to be cases of alleged religious intolerance and expulsions from certain indigenous communities. This was particularly common in Chiapas, where many residents follow unique and centuries-old syncretistic (Catholic-Mayan) religious practices and beliefs. Endemic poverty, land tenure disputes, and lack of educational opportunities also contributed to tensions in many communities, which at times have resulted in violence.

The most common incidents of intolerance related to traditional community celebrations. Protestant evangelicals often resisted making financial donations demanded by community norms that go partly to local celebrations of Catholic religious holidays, and they also resisted

participating in festivals involving alcohol. News reports estimated that 10,000 evangelical Christians lived in segregated areas surrounding San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas.

On March 14, 2006, Obeth Lorenzana Velazquez was convicted of murder and sentenced to twenty-five years' imprisonment for the 2003 killing of pastor Jairo Solis Lopez, from the Chiapas municipality of Mapastepec. He confessed that the crime was related to a personal quarrel. From the beginning of the investigation, the attorney general ruled out motivation for religious reasons, and the under secretary for religious affairs in Chiapas did not challenge this conclusion.

At the end of the period covered by this report, two men detained for the 2003 killing of evangelical Christian pastor Mariano Diaz Mendez, near the town of San Juan Chamula in Chiapas, had not been tried. They confessed that the crime was politically motivated. The attorney general ruled out motivation for religious reasons, and the undersecretary for religious affairs in Chiapas did not challenge this conclusion.

In Chiapas traditionalist local leaders have denied approximately 150 children access to the local public schools in six indigenous communities every year since 1994 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 October 2005, during contentious contract negotiations, demonstrators supporting workers of the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) put up signs and painted graffiti at the IMSS headquarters that included swastikas and anti-Semitic slurs in reference to IMSS Director Santiago Levy. The incident was condemned by public figures, including President Fox and Secretary of Government Carlos Abascal. The leadership of the IMSS workers' union disavowed the action, and approximately 300 of its members were required to take a tolerance sensitivity course.

The DAR reported that since the beginning of the Fox administration in 2000, it had received 115 reports of conflicts related to religious intolerance in the country and that 93 such conflicts had been resolved. Government officials, the national human rights ombudsman, and interfaith groups continued to conduct discussions about incidents of intolerance to promote social peace. An Interfaith Council included representatives from the Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Mormon, Lutheran, other Protestant, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh Dharma, and Sufi Islam communities.

#### 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 the government offices for religious affairs and human rights on federal and state levels. Embassy officers also met with members of religious groups and NGOs, including the chair of the human rights committee for an interfaith council and NGOs for freedom of religion and conscience.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)