



El Salvador

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects 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 Constitution specifically recognizes the Roman Catholic Church and grants it legal status.

The generally amicable relationship among religions 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 its population is estimated at approximately 6.7 million.

The country is predominantly Roman Catholic, with a sizeable Protestant minority. There are also small communities representing Seventh-day Adventist, Jewish, Hare Krishna, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Muslim faiths, among others. A very small minority practices a native 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 suggest approximately 35 percent are Baptists and members of Assemblies of God.) Jehovah's Witnesses accounted for an estimated 1.9 percent of the population, 0.7 percent were Mormons, 2.3 percent were associated with other churches and religious groups, and 16.8 percent were not affiliated with any religious organization. The predominance of the Catholic Church does not negatively affect the religious freedom of other groups. Several Protestant missionary groups are active.

In a study published April 24, 2005, the leading daily newspaper La Prensa Grafica reported that in the last 17 years, the Catholic Church lost 12 percent of its share of population, while the percentage belonging to Protestant sects almost doubled, from approximately 16 to 29 percent. Catholicism has its greatest percentage of adherents (60.8) among those above age 53, and its lowest share (50.1 percent) among those aged 18 to 26. Geographically, Catholicism reaches its highest percentage (circa 67 percent) in the nation's central zone that includes the populous greater San Salvador metropolitan region, while in the westernmost provinces, approximately 42 percent of the population identifies itself as Catholic.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does 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 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 formally incorporate. The Civil Code gives equal status to churches as nonprofit foundations. For formal recognition, they must apply through the General Office of 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 certify a group, it must determine that the group's

constitution and bylaws do not violate the law. Once certified, the group must publish the DGFASFL approval and its constitution and bylaws 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. The law specifically exempts unions, cooperatives, and the Catholic Church. During the period covered by this report, the DGFASFL reported 112 requests for new registration; 40 were approved, 70 were pending, and 2 lacked the necessary documentation to be approved.

The 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.

A March 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.

Non-Salvadoran nationals seeking to promote actively 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. All private schools, whether religious or secular, must meet the same standards to be approved by the Ministry of Education.

The Constitution requires the President, Cabinet ministers and vice ministers, Supreme Court justices, judges, governors, the Attorney General, the 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.

The President attended 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.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to the free practice of religion. The National Conference of Churches, an interfaith organization created to promote religious tolerance and to coordinate church sponsored social programs, has been inactive for more than 3 years. In early 2002, discussions began aimed at restarting the organization; however, no action had been taken by the end of the period covered by this report.

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. Additionally, the Embassy sponsored trips to the United States, such as under the International Visitor Program, for church leaders.

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