



## Mexico

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there are 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 religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, in certain southern areas, 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 the evangelical and Catholic churches agree the roots of these conflicts sometimes lie 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 its population is approximately 98 million.

According to the Government's 2000 census, approximately 88 percent of respondents identified themselves as at least nominally Roman Catholic. There are an estimated 11,000 Roman Catholic churches and 14,000 ordained Catholic priests and nuns. An additional estimated 90,000 laypersons work in the Catholic Church system.

Other religious groups for which the 2000 census provided estimates include: evangelicals (includes Pentecostals, Neopentecostals 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, 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 are no definitive estimates on membership in various Protestant denominations. A 2000 press report indicated that Presbyterians account 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 claims 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. Some Protestant evangelical groups claim that their coreligionists constitute 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 is unknown, but at the end of the period covered by this report, the Director for Religious Affairs of the Federal Secretariat of Government (DAR) had registered 3,209 evangelical and 75 Protestant associations.

Non-Catholic Christians are concentrated primarily in the south. Chiapas State, with a large indigenous population and overall approximately 4 percent of the country's population, has the largest percentage of non-Catholics, 36.2 percent, compared to the national average, estimated at 12 percent. Non-Catholics represent 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.

There is a small Muslim population in the city of Torreon, Coahuila, and there are an estimated 300 Muslims in the San Cristobal

de las Casas area in Chiapas. This group is composed of Mayan indigenous people who converted through the Mission for Dawa in Mexico, an Islamic group recently founded by Spanish missionaries.

Some indigenous people in the states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Yucatan practice a syncretistic 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 (see Sections II and III).

## Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Federal Government generally respects this right in practice; however, there are some restrictions. State and municipal governments generally protect this right, but some local officials, particularly in the south, infringed on religious freedom, using religion as a pretext for conflicts that are related to political, ethnic, or land issues.

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, for the first time, a prohibition against any form of discrimination, including discrimination against persons on the basis of religion.

To operate legally, religious associations must register with the DAR. The registration process is routine. The most recent statistics show that 6,373 religious associations are registered, of which the vast majority are evangelical Protestant or Roman Catholic. During the period covered by this report, the DAR registered 126 associations, some of which had applied for registration previously. In addition, 201 applications either awaited further supporting documentation or were not in compliance with registration criteria at the end of the period covered by this report.

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, an organization had its registry revoked by the DAR for changing its statutes by adopting the worship of the "Saint of Death." The group, known as MEX-USA, was a traditionalist Catholic group that broke away from the Catholic Church and registered with the DAR as a Catholic organization following the Catholic faith. However, it later incorporated members who worshipped "the Saint of Death" (Santa Muerte), and the group began worshipping this saint as its primary deity. This resulted in protests from the Catholic Church, leading to the DAR investigation and the registry revocation. This was the first revocation since the establishment of the Law of Religious Associations. According to the DAR, the revocation was legal, since the group changed the statutes under which it had registered itself. DAR stated that MEX-USA could apply for a new registration.

Another association registered with the DAR, the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (IURD), was fined for profiting from its activities. In January 2005, the media reported that the IURD was asking persons for donations of the equivalent of approximately \$1,000, \$5,000, or \$10,000 to receive salvation. The DAR investigated, concluded that IURD was profiting from its activities, and in April fined it the equivalent of approximately \$20,000.

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. The Governor of Nuevo Leon has expanded the position of Under Secretary for Citizens' Services to include Religious Affairs as part of the Under Secretary's portfolio.

Historically, tensions existed between the Roman Catholic Church and the post 1910 modern state. Consequently, severe restrictions on the rights of the Church and members of the clergy were written into the Constitution. In 1992, the Government reestablished diplomatic relations with the Holy See and lifted almost all restrictions on the Catholic Church. The latter action included granting all religious groups legal status, conceding them limited property rights, and lifting restrictions on the number of

priests in the country. However, the law continues to mandate a strict separation of church and state. The Constitution still 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 ministers in public institutions such as jails or hospitals is neither explicitly prohibited nor supported by law.

The Constitution provides that public education must be secular. Religious associations, however, are free to maintain private schools. Primary-level home schooling 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. Home schooling is allowed at the secondary level once schooling at an accredited primary school has been completed.

Religious associations must notify the Government of their intent to hold a religious meeting outside of a licensed place of worship. The Government received 5,760 such notifications from July 1, 2004, through June 30, 2005.

The Government requires religious groups to apply for a permit to construct new buildings or to convert existing buildings into houses of worship. The latest statistics available showed that the Government granted permits for 1,239 buildings between July 1, 2004, and June 30, 2005. For 453 pending applications, the Government had requested additional information pertaining to the structure or to its proposed use. Religious groups reported no difficulty in obtaining government permission for these activities.

Since 2001, the Secretary of Government has engaged in dialogue with representatives of various religions and denominations to discuss issues of mutual concern.

Missionaries representing a wide variety of groups are present. Although the Federal Government limits the number of visas each religious group is allowed, the application procedure is routine and uncomplicated. The Government has granted 49,466 such visas since 1995, including 6,213 between July 1, 2004, and June 30, 2005.

Of nine official holidays, two are associated with Christian holy days (Good Friday and Christmas Day). In addition, most employers give holiday leave on Holy Thursday, All Souls' Day, Virgin of Guadalupe Day, and Christmas Eve.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Catholic Church occasionally makes comments on national politics. The most recent were in April 2005, when Church officials called for stripping Mexico City Mayor Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of his immunity, and in May 2005, when Cardinal Norberto Rivera issued calls for peace and civility in the 2006 national elections.

According to the Religious Associations and Public Worship 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 permission is granted routinely. From July 1, 2004, to June 30, 2005, authorities approved 7,391 transmissions.

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. There were reportedly 90,879 buildings dedicated to religious activities as of July 2001. Of those, 80,846 were the property of the State and 10,033 belonged to religious groups. As of March 2005, 13,479 belonged to religious groups.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

The Federal Government generally respects religious freedom in practice; however, poor enforcement mechanisms have allowed local authorities in Chiapas 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 regard 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. Between July 2004 and June 2005, the Office of Religious Affairs in the Interior Ministry received eight complaints of such harassment (see Section III). Religious differences often were the cited feature of such incidents; however, ethnic differences, land disputes, and struggles over local political and economic power frequently were the underlying causes. 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) claims that municipal authorities have expelled 30,000 persons from their communities in the last 30 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 are no official statistics on the displaced. However, the Diagnostic on Human Rights in Mexico, published in October 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 March 2005, Catholics in the community of Paste, Zinacantan municipality, Chiapas, refused to admit Protestant children to schools, and the water supply was cut off for 90 Protestant families (approximately 300 persons) in the same community. Also, Catholics stated they would not allow four Protestant taxi drivers to continue their profession. State government officials in Chiapas summoned Zinacantan Mayor Antonio de la Cruz and other municipal officials to a meeting in San Cristobal de las Casas, in which they resolved the conflict. At the end of the period covered by this report, there had been no further acts against Protestants in the community.

A mob that included local officials linked to the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD), armed with sticks, stones, and machetes, drove seven Protestant families from their homes in June 2004 because the families asked local officials to ensure that their freedom of worship be respected. The families joined approximately 300 to 400 Tojolabal Christians expelled from their farms in Las Margaritas Township in the previous 10 months. Another attack warning was issued by the Nuevo Matzan village council, which ordered 15 evangelical families to abandon their homes or face severe consequences. At the end of the period covered by this report, government officials in Chiapas had taken no action, claiming that the families left of their own volition (see Section III).

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 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.

#### 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 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. Syncretistic practices are not merely an extension of religious belief but also the basis for the social and cultural life of the community. Therefore, other religious practices are perceived not only as different and strange but also as threats to indigenous culture. In some southern indigenous communities, abandoning syncretistic practices for Protestant beliefs is perceived as a threat to the community's unique identity. Endemic poverty, land tenure disputes, and lack of educational opportunities also contribute to tensions in many communities, which at times result in violence.

The most common incidents of intolerance related to traditional community celebrations. Protestant evangelicals often resist making financial donations demanded by community norms that go partly to local celebrations of Catholic religious holidays, and they resist participating in festivals involving alcohol. News reports estimate that 10,000 evangelical Christians live in segregated areas surrounding San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas.

There was no further information on investigations or arrests regarding the 2003 killing of evangelical Christian pastor Mariano Diaz Mendez, near the town of San Juan Chamula in Chiapas, or of Jairo Solis Lopez, another pastor, who was killed earlier in the Chiapas municipality of Mapastepec.

In Chiapas, traditionalist local leaders have denied approximately 150 children access to the local public schools in 6 indigenous communities every year since 1994 because they are evangelicals. They 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 July 2004, 15 evangelical indigenous persons accused of being witches were expelled by Tzeltal Indians of the Matzan community in Chiapas. The persons who were expelled filed a complaint with the Deputy Attorney's Office of Indian Justice. No further information was available at the end of the period covered by this report.

In September 2004, the DAR reported that there were 18 conflicts related to religious intolerance in the country. The DAR has stated that since the beginning of the Fox administration in 2000, 79 such conflicts have 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 includes representatives from the Anglican, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Mormon, Lutheran, other Protestant, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Sikh Dharma, and Sufi Islam communities.

During the period covered by this report, the Jewish community in the country encountered no violence, harassment, or vandalism. There were occasional protests due to the ongoing turmoil in the Middle East, but the Government acted quickly and proactively to offer protection. In 2003, both houses of the Congress unanimously passed the Federal Law for Preventing and

Eliminating Discrimination. The fourth article of the law explicitly mentions anti-Semitism as a form of discrimination.

In 2004, the head of CNDH criticized harassment of indigenous people who had converted to Islam, primarily in the area of San Cristobal in Chiapas; he attributed the harassment in part to reaction against increased Muslim proselytizing. CNDH initiated an investigation after receiving complaints that federal authorities discriminated against followers of Islam and, in January 2004, considered the matter closed.

#### 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 met with government officials, staff of NGOs, and members of religious groups to discuss issues of religious freedom. In October 2004, Embassy representatives traveled to Chiapas and met with state and local officials, religious leaders, and NGO members to discuss religious freedom specifically and the overall human rights situation in the state.

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