



Paraguay

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.

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 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 157,047 square miles, and its population is approximately 6.2 million (2004 estimate).

According to the Government's 2002 national census, the population is 89.6 percent Catholic, 6.2 percent evangelical Christian, 1.1 percent other Christian, 0.6 percent indigenous religions, 0.3 percent other (non-Christian) religions; 1.1 percent of respondents claimed no religious preference, and 1.0 percent did not provide information regarding their religious preference.

There are active Catholic, evangelical Christian, mainline Protestant, Jewish (Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform congregations), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Baha'i communities. There is an Islamic community concentrated in the Department of Alto Parana, an area that experienced substantial immigration from the Middle East, particularly from Lebanon. There is also a substantial Mennonite community, principally in the western Department of Boqueron.

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 and other laws prohibit discrimination on the basis of religion.

All religious groups must be registered with the Ministry of the Interior. The criteria for recognition consist of completing required paperwork, certification as a nonprofit organization, financial and criminal background checks, and payment of a small fee. The Government enforces few controls on religious groups, and there are many unregistered churches. The latter are typically small, Christian evangelical churches with only a few members.

The Government is secular. Most government officials are Catholic. Adherence to a particular creed confers no legal advantage or disadvantage, and foreign and local missionaries proselytize freely. The Government does not take any particular steps to promote interfaith understanding.

The following religious holy days are also official national holidays: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (August 15), Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary (December 8), and Christmas. The Government also observed the death of Pope John Paul II as a public holiday on the day of his funeral.

The country's armed forces have an extensive Roman Catholic chaplain program. The Catholic Church considers this chaplaincy as a diocese and appoints a bishop to oversee the program on a full-time basis.

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 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. While there is no large-scale ecumenical movement in the country, all religious groups freely exercise their beliefs in a largely tolerant environment. The Catholic Church operates without interference and is permitted to play a visible role in state functions. For example, the Catholic Church often performs Mass at government functions without controversy. Evangelical and other Protestant churches engage in marches and prayer vigils, and part of the Jewish community holds a large public menorah lighting every year for Hanukkah. Protestant evangelical groups, such as the Assemblies of God, and Mormons conduct missionary activities without governmental or societal interference.

The Catholic Church is involved in politics at the fringe, mostly in socio-economic matters, and does not support any political party. The Church freely criticizes the Government. The Church is somewhat protective of its leading role in public life. On several occasions, politicians and the media criticized President Nicanor Duarte Frutos, a nominal Catholic who attends the Raices Mennonite Church, based on his religious preference. For example, the President was widely criticized for his decision not to attend the funeral of Pope John Paul II in Vatican City, although he later attended the installation of Pope Benedict XVI. However, there is a popular belief that Mennonites are ideal public servants because they transpose their honesty and efficient industry to government. On several occasions, President Duarte criticized the Catholic hierarchy, accusing it of bias against his administration.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Ambassador and Embassy officials met regularly with representatives of different religious groups.

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