



El Salvador

International Religious Freedom Report 2004

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 more than 6 million.

The country is predominantly Roman Catholic, with a sizeable Protestant minority. There are also small communities representing the Seventh-day Adventist, Jewish, Hare Krishna, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Muslim faiths, among others. A very small segment of the population practices a native religion. According to a 2003 survey by the Technological University Public Opinion Center, approximately 57.1 percent of the population is Roman Catholic. Additionally, 21.2 percent belong to Protestant churches. Among Protestants, informal church estimates suggest approximately 35 percent are Baptists and members of Assemblies of God. Members of Jehovah's Witnesses accounted for an estimated 1.9 percent of the population, 0.7 percent are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), 2.3 percent was associated with other churches and religious groups, and 16.8 percent was not affiliated with any church or religion. The predominance of the Catholic Church does not negatively affect the religious freedom of other groups. Several Protestant missionary groups are active.

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 Non-Profit Organizations and Foundations law says such groups may register for official status. A religious group does not have to register with the Government, but must if it wants to formally incorporate. The Civil Code gives equal status to churches as non-profit foundations. For formal recognition, they must apply through the General Office of Non-Profit Associations and

Foundations (DGFASFL) within the Ministry of Governance. Each church 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 it can certify a church, the DGFASFL must determine that its constitution and bylaws do not violate the law. Once certified, the church must publish the DGFASFL approval and its constitution and bylaws in the official government gazette.

The Non-Profit Organizations and Foundations law charges the Ministry of Governance with registering, regulating, and overseeing the finances of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), non-Catholic churches, and other religious groups in the country. The law specifically exempts unions, cooperatives, and the Catholic Church. During the period covered by this report, the DGFASFL reported 103 requests for new registration; 83 were approved and 20 are pending.

The regulations implementing the tax law grant tax-exempt status to recognized religious groups. The regulations also make donations to recognized churches tax-deductible.

A 1940 law establishes Holy Week as a holiday 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.

Foreign nationals seeking to actively promote 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 in the country. 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. The Human Rights Ombudswoman's Office reported no claims of discrimination or persecution on religious grounds.

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 religious freedom. 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 two years. Although discussions began in early 2002 to restart the organization, no action had been taken by the end of the period covered by this report.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Government maintains a regular dialogue with principal religious leaders, church officers, church-sponsored universities, and NGOs. Additionally, the U.S. Embassy sponsors trips to the United States, such as those under the International Visitor Program, for church leaders.

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