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El Salvador

International Religious Freedom Report 2003

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 in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has a total area of 8,108 square miles, and its population is over 6 million.

The country is predominantly Roman Catholic. According to a 1998 survey by the Central American University Public Opinion Institute, approximately 55.2 percent of the population were members of the Roman Catholic Church. Additionally, 20.6 percent were members of Protestant churches, 2.1 percent were associated with other churches and religious groups, and 22.1 percent were not affiliated with any church or religion. Outside of the Catholic and Protestant churches, there are small communities representing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist, Jewish, and Muslim faiths, among others. A very small segment of the population practices a native religion. The predominance of the Catholic Church does not impact negatively on the religious freedom of other denominations. Several Protestant missionary groups are active in the country.

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 specifically recognizes the Roman Catholic Church and grants it legal status. In addition, the Constitution provides that other churches may register for such status in accordance with the law. The Civil Code specifies that a church must apply for formal recognition 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. The DGFASFL must determine that the constitution and bylaws do not violate the law before it can certify a church. Once certified, the church must publish the DGFASFL approval and its constitution and bylaws in the official government gazette.

In 1997 the Government implemented a 1996 law that charges the Ministry of Interior (which has since merged into the Ministry of Governance) with registering, regulating, and overseeing the finances of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-Catholic churches in the country. The law specifically exempts unions, cooperatives, and the Catholic Church. During the period covered by this report, the DGFASFL reported 108 requests for new registration. Eighty-one were approved, 26 are still pending, and 1 was denied and given the opportunity to resubmit due to insufficient documentation. There have been no allegations that churches encountered problems in obtaining registration.

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

The Constitution states that all persons are equal before the law and prohibits discrimination based on nationality, race, sex, or religion.

Non-Salvadoran 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 in the country while on a visitor or tourist visa. There were no allegations during the period covered by this report of difficulties in obtaining visas for religious activities.

Public education is secular. Private religious schools operate in the country. All private schools, whether religious or secular, must meet the same standards in order to be approved by the Ministry of Education.

The Constitution requires the President, cabinet ministers and vice ministers, Supreme Court justices, magistrates, the Attorney General, the Public Defender, and other senior government officials to be laypersons. However, there is no such requirement for election to the National Legislative Assembly or municipal government offices.

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

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to the free practice of religion. The National Conference of Churches (CNI), an interfaith organization created to promote religious tolerance and to coordinate a church-sponsored social program, has been inactive for more than a year. Although discussions began in early 2002 about restarting the organization, no action had been taken by year's end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights. The U.S. Government maintains a regular dialog with the principal religious leaders, church officers, church-sponsored universities, and NGOs.

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