

HONDURAS 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions. The government officially recognized only the Roman Catholic Church as a church. It classified other religious groups, including the Evangelical Association of Honduras, as religious associations with fewer rights and privileges than the Catholic Church. The government annulled a law that granted official recognition to a limited confederation of religious groups. It worked with religious organizations to address other concerns regarding registration and discrimination.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officials maintained a dialogue with the government and religious leaders to support religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.6 million (July 2014 estimate). There are no reliable government statistics on religious affiliation. A 2007 survey by a Latin American market research and public opinion company reports that 47 percent of respondents identify as Roman Catholic and 36 percent as evangelical Protestant. The principal religious groups are Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mennonite, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and evangelical Protestant. The most prominent evangelical churches include the Abundant Life, Living Love, and Great Commission Churches. A growing number of evangelical churches have no denominational affiliation. There are approximately 2,000 Muslims and 1,000 Jews.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions so long as such exercise does not contravene other laws or the public order. It stipulates that only laypersons may seek election to congress.

By law only the legislature has the authority to confer the status of a legally recognized church. The law distinguishes between recognized churches and registered religious organizations. The constitution authorizes the executive branch to grant juridical personality to associations, including religious associations, which they must obtain in order to register with the government. The government does not require religious groups to register; however, registered groups may apply to the Ministry of Finance to receive benefits such as tax exemptions and customs duty waivers. To register, organizations must have a board of directors. The government does not distinguish between religious and nonreligious organizations. Associations seeking juridical personality must submit an application to the Secretariat of State of Human Rights, Justice, Governance, and Decentralization describing their internal organization, bylaws, and goals. The Office of the Solicitor General must review all applications from religious groups and render a constitutional opinion. Applications also require presidential signature.

In January the government officially published in the national gazette the Supreme Court nullification of a 2010 law that granted official recognition to a limited confederation of religious groups and authorized it to determine whether other organizations qualified as religious groups. In 2012, the Supreme Court found the law violated the constitutional protection of freedom of religion.

The constitution states that public education shall be secular and allows the establishment of private schools. Parents have the right to choose the type of education their children receive.

The law prohibits the immigration of foreign missionaries who practice religions claiming to use witchcraft or satanic rituals, and allows deportation of foreigners who practice witchcraft or “religious fraud.”

Government Practices

The legislature recognized only the Roman Catholic Church as a legally recognized church. Following the publication of the Supreme Court’s ruling on the confederation of religious groups, the government reclassified the Evangelical Confederation of Honduras, which represents the evangelical leadership, from a church to a religious organization. It continued to classify recognized religious groups other than the Catholic Church as religious associations without some of

the rights and privileges given to churches, such as tax exemption for clergy salaries and state recognition of religious marriages.

The Secretariat of State of Human Rights, Justice, Governance, and Decentralization agreed to work with religious organizations to develop clearer rules for registering religious organizations and nongovernmental organizations. Religious organizations criticized the application of one uniform set of registration rules to all types of organizations, including religious organizations, and said they should be recognized as religious rather than nongovernmental organizations.

The secretary of education signed a letter excusing members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church from attending “Civic Saturdays,” in which the government required public and private schools to hold classes on some Saturdays. Members of the church stated the requirement to work and/or attend classes on Saturdays infringed upon their freedom of religion. Church members reported that some teachers and principals still expected Saturday attendance, despite the secretary’s letter excusing them. Members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church also filed complaints at several universities for failing to provide alternatives to Saturday classes for Adventist students. Their cases were pending at year’s end.

The armed forces had an official Catholic patron saint. Each military base commander selected either a Catholic or a Protestant chaplain. The chaplains were entitled to a stipend and a military uniform for the duration of their military chaplaincy. Members of prominent Catholic and evangelical Protestant churches were represented on more than a dozen governmental commissions. The government routinely invited Catholic and evangelical leaders to lead prayers at government events.

The government required foreign missionaries to obtain entry and residence permits. A local institution or individual was required to sponsor a missionary’s application for residency, which was submitted to immigration authorities. The government signed an agreement with Mormons and Seventh-day Adventists to facilitate entry and residence permits for missionaries from these religious groups. The government approved tax exemptions for emergency aid provided by certain religious organizations, including Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists, and some evangelical organizations.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials maintained an open dialogue with government officials regarding religious freedom issues. Embassy representatives also maintained dialogue with religious leaders and organizations to support religious tolerance.