Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship and the law prohibits religious discrimination. Church and state are officially separate. The National Office of Religious Affairs (ONAR), a government agency within the executive office, is charged with ensuring that the rights of religious minorities are protected, and the government took actions to ensure that citizens were able to exercise their religion freely. Roman Catholicism maintained its prominent status in public schools, hospitals, prisons, and the military.

There were threats of violence against Jews and acts of vandalism against Jewish property in connection with public reaction to the conflict in Gaza. Law enforcement officers responded promptly to these threats and government officials condemned anti-Semitism.

U.S. embassy representatives periodically met with religious leaders and government officials to discuss religious diversity and tolerance, and to maintain interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.4 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the 2002 census, 70 percent of the population over the age of 14 self-identifies as Roman Catholic and 15 percent identifies as evangelical, a term that refers to all non-Catholic Christian groups except The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Orthodox churches (including Armenian, Greek, Persian, Serbian, and Ukrainian communities), and Seventh-day Adventists. Approximately 90 percent of those classified as evangelical belong to Pentecostal movement churches. Anglican, Baptist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Reformed Evangelical, and Wesleyan groups constitute the remaining 10 percent of Protestant groups. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Bahais, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, and members of the Unification Church.

According to the census, 5 percent of the population self-identifies as indigenous, of whom 65 percent identify their faith community as Catholic, 29 percent as evangelical, and 6 percent as other, including adherents of traditional indigenous faith practices.
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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the free exercise of worship, provided that practices do not conflict with public order or offend the morals of the community. It allows religious groups to establish places of worship, as long as the locations abide by hygiene and security regulations.

According to the constitution, church and state are officially separate. The law prohibits religious discrimination. The ONAR is charged with promoting religious freedom and tolerance and ensuring respect for constitutional protections of religious freedom. The law provides civil legal remedies to victims of discrimination based on religion or belief and increases criminal penalties for acts of violence based on discrimination.

The law does not require religious groups to register with the government; however, there are tax benefits available to those that register. Religious groups may apply for religious nonprofit status, which differs from the nonprofit status for other nongovernmental organizations, and may adopt a charter and bylaws suited to a religious entity rather than a private corporation. There are currently over 3,000 religious entities registered, the majority of which are small Pentecostal movement faith communities. By law, the Ministry of Justice may not refuse to accept the registration petition of a religious entity, although it may object to petitions within 90 days if legal prerequisites for registration are not satisfied. Applicants for religious nonprofit status must present to the Ministry of Justice an authorized copy of their charter and corresponding bylaws along with signatures and identification numbers from all those who signed the charter. The bylaws must include the organization’s mission, creed, and structure. The charter needs to specify the signers, the name of the organization, and its physical address, and must include confirmation that bylaws have been approved. The petitioner then has 60 days to address objections the ministry raises or challenge the ministry in court. Once registered, the state cannot dissolve a religious entity by decree. The semiautonomous Council for the Defense of the State may initiate a judicial review, but the government has never deregistered a legally registered group. Religious groups may establish affiliates (schools, clubs, and sports organizations) without registering them as separate entities. According to ONAR, 312 petitions for registration were filed with the Ministry of Justice; the Ministry did not object
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to any petition and every group that completed the required paperwork was registered.

Publicly-subsidized schools must offer religious education for two teaching hours per week through high school. Local school administrators decide how funds are spent. The majority of religious instruction in public schools is Roman Catholic, although the Ministry of Education has approved instruction curricula designed by 14 other religious groups. Schools are required to provide religious instruction for students in the curricula requested by their parents, and parents may have their children excused from religious education. Parents also have the right to homeschool their children for religious reasons or may enroll them in private, religiously-oriented schools.

The law grants religious groups the right to appoint chaplains to offer religious services in public hospitals, prisons, and military units. Prisoners may request religious accommodation. Regulations for the armed forces and law enforcement agencies allow officially registered religious groups to appoint chaplains to serve in each branch of the armed forces, in the national uniformed police, and the national investigative police.

Government Practices

Roman Catholicism had a dominant presence in schools, prisons, and hospitals. The Catholic Church administered prominent private hospitals, schools, and social services organizations and employed chaplains within prisons and the military. Representatives from ONAR regularly met with religious leaders to ensure that minority religious practices were respected in state institutions.

The celebration of a Catholic Mass frequently marked public events, although the government continued efforts to include traditions from other faiths and to ensure that official blessings at government events reflected the diversity of religious practices within the country. Government officials, acting in their professional capacity, attended Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and other religious services and ceremonies to show support for those communities.

Authorities worked to implement the requirement to provide non-Catholic religious education in public schools when requested by parents by engaging and supporting schools through municipal offices of religious affairs, encouraging the
development of community-supported religious curricula, and providing religious diversity training to public servants.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Jewish community reported threats of violence against Jews and acts of vandalism against Jewish institutions, including synagogues, during the summer, concurrent with the escalation of violence in Gaza. Many of the threats included references to Israel and to the Gaza conflict. Law enforcement responded promptly to reported threats and government officials condemned anti-Semitism. In November the government hosted a seminar to bring together the local Palestinian and Jewish communities to encourage harmony between the two groups.

The Bahai community reported significant progress in the construction of the Bahai House of Worship in Santiago, which is on schedule to be completed in 2016. The community stated that it was in constant dialogue with the neighboring community and had faced no opposition to the construction of the temple, the largest in South America.

While indigenous groups had the right to participate in development decisions affecting their traditions and spiritual practices, including the exploitation of natural resources, the NGO Citizens’ Observatory stated that they encountered obstacles to exercising these rights. Some indigenous communities demanded restitution of privately and publicly owned traditional lands and expressed concern that projected hydroelectric projects in the south would flood ceremonial and spiritually significant locations of the Mapuche people, an indigenous group. The government announced it would implement a land restitution process with indigenous communities and engaged in political consultations with indigenous communities about how to structure a Ministry of Indigenous Affairs that would be responsive to these concerns.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials periodically met with religious leaders and government officials to discuss institutional cooperation among religious and government organizations, interfaith dialogue among youth, and anti-discrimination legislation.
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On July 23, the Charge d’Affaires hosted leaders of religious communities at an interfaith dinner. The event celebrated religious diversity and interfaith dialogue in the United States and Chile, and emphasized religious tolerance and improving interfaith dialogue among youth.