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USDOS – US Department of State

## 2017 Report on International Religious Freedom - Chile

### Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship. The law prohibits religious discrimination. Religion and state are officially separate. The National Office of Religious Affairs (ONAR), an executive government agency, is charged with facilitating communication between faith communities and the government and ensuring the rights of religious minorities are protected. Catholic and Episcopalian leaders condemned the Constitutional Court’s August decision to partially lift the country’s total ban on abortions, stating that permitting abortions was unconstitutional and violated their religious beliefs. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reported arsonists burned down eight churches in the Araucania Region between January and October, following more than 10 similar incidents the previous year. No one was hurt in the attacks. The regional government announced in April it would help to reconstruct the destroyed churches. In August after ONAR’s intervention, representatives of the Catholic and Protestant faiths signed an agreement with the Chilean Timber Association (CORMA) under which CORMA provided materials to rebuild the churches. In June ONAR published the first edition of an ethics code to facilitate a dialogue of mutual understanding among the country’s religious communities, public and private entities, labor leaders, and civil society. With the stated goal of facilitating civil society input, ONAR continued to meet regularly with its Interfaith Advisory Council to facilitate interreligious dialogue between religious and government leaders, including holding meetings with indigenous groups, religious minorities, and civil society leaders.

A June soccer game in Santiago between Club Israeliti, a Chilean-Jewish team, and Club Palestino, a Chilean-Palestinian team, ended in physical violence. Jewish community leaders filed a complaint with the public prosecutor over anti-Semitic chants by Club Palestino fans. Chilean-Palestinian leaders complained to authorities the entrance to their community’s soccer field was marked with graffiti of the Star of David and the words “Palestine doesn’t exist, Arabs are terrorists.” The Jewish community also expressed concern about anti-Semitic flyers distributed at university campuses.

The U.S. Ambassador and embassy representatives periodically met with government officials and religious leaders to discuss religious diversity and tolerance and to raise incidents of concern, including church burnings and the conflict at the Israeliti-Palestino game. In June a senior embassy official hosted leaders of various religious communities

at an interfaith iftar designed to emphasize religious tolerance and promote interfaith dialogue. In August a senior embassy official participated in an interreligious dialogue between government officials and faith leaders.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.8 million (July 2017 estimate). According to ONAR, approximately 60 percent of the population self-identifies as Roman Catholic and approximately 18 percent identifies as “evangelical,” a term used in the country to refer to all non-Catholic Christian groups except The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Orthodox churches (including the Armenian, Greek, Persian, Serbian, and Ukrainian communities), and Seventh-day Adventists. In the most recent census, conducted in 2002, Bahais, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of the Orthodox churches, Seventh-day Adventists, and unspecified members of religious groups together constituted less than 5 percent of the population. An estimated 4 percent of the population identifies as atheist or agnostic, while 17 percent of the population identifies as nonreligious.

According to ONAR, 9 percent of the population self-identifies as indigenous, of whom 55 percent identify as Catholic, 37 percent as evangelical, and 6 percent identify as other, which includes adherents of traditional indigenous faith practices. Over the last decade, the country has experienced a decline in numbers of individuals affiliated with the Catholic faith. According to the 2002 census, 70 percent of the country’s population identified as Roman Catholic in 2002 compared to the 60 percent ONAR specified in 2017. Evangelical Christian affiliation increased from 15.1 to 18 percent between 2002 and 2017.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the free exercise of worship. It states that these practices must not be “opposed to morals, to good customs or to the public order.” Religious groups may establish and maintain places of worship, as long as the locations are in compliance with public hygiene (health standards) and security regulations established by laws and municipal orders.

According to the constitution, religion and state are officially separate. The law prohibits religious discrimination and provides civil legal remedies to victims of discrimination based on religion or belief and increases criminal penalties for acts of discriminatory violence.

The law does not require religious groups to register with the government; however, there are tax benefits for those that do. Once registered, a religious group is recognized as a religious nonprofit organization; religious organizations have the option of adopting a charter and bylaws suited to a religious entity rather than a private corporation or a secular nonprofit. Under the law, religious nonprofit organizations may create affiliates, such as charitable foundations, schools, or additional houses of worship, which retain the tax benefits of the religious parent organization. According to ONAR, public law recognizes more than 3,200 religious entities as legal entities. By law, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) may not refuse 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 the MOJ with an authorized copy of their charter, corresponding bylaws with signatures, and the national identification numbers of charter signatories. The bylaws must include the organization’s mission, creed, and structure. The charter must specify the signatories, the name of the organization, its physical address, and must include confirmation that bylaws have been approved by the religious institutions’ charter signatories. In the event the MOJ raises objections to the group, the group may petition; the petitioning group has 60 days to address the MOJ’s objections or can challenge them in court. Once registered, the state may not dissolve a religious entity by decree. If concerns are raised about a religious group’s activities after registration, the semi-autonomous Council for the Defense of the State may initiate a judicial review of the matter. The government has never deregistered a legally registered group. One registration per religious group is sufficient to extend nonprofit status to affiliates, such as additional places of worship or schools, clubs, and sports organizations, without registering them as separate entities. According to ONAR, the MOJ receives approximately 30 petitions monthly; the MOJ has not objected to any petition and has registered every group that completed the required paperwork.

By law, all schools must offer religious education for two teaching hours per week through pre-elementary, elementary, middle, and high school. Local school administrators decide how religious education classes are structured. The majority of religious instruction in public schools is Catholic, although the Ministry of Education has approved instruction curricula designed by 14 other religious groups, such as orthodox and reformed Jews, evangelicals, Seventh-day Adventists, and other groups. Schools must provide religious instruction for students according to students’ religious affiliations. Parents may have their children excused from religious education. Parents also have the right to homeschool their children for religious reasons or enroll them in private, religiously oriented schools.

The law grants religious groups the right to appoint chaplains to offer religious services in public hospitals and prisons. Prisoners may request religious accommodations. 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.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

## Government Practices

Catholic and Episcopalian leaders condemned the Constitutional Court’s August decision to partially lift the country’s total ban on abortions, stating that permitting abortions was unconstitutional and violated their religious beliefs.

Both central and regional authorities continued to support the provision of non-Catholic religious education in public schools when parents requested it. Authorities supported schools through municipal offices of religious affairs, encouraged the development of community-supported religious curricula, and provided religious diversity training to public servants.

While prison and military chaplains remained predominately Catholic, the numbers of evangelical Protestant chaplains and other non-Catholic chaplains increased, due in part to the diverse religious affiliations of the prison population and the increase in evangelical Protestant followers in the country. ONAR continued to work to counter perceptions of bias and support diversity in the chaplaincy by encouraging other faith communities to prepare and present candidates for those positions. The National Institute of Human Rights, an independent government agency, continued to report that Protestant faith communities operated without impediments in the prison system.

According to CSW, from January to October, arsonists set fire to four Catholic and four Baptist churches in the primarily indigenous Mapuche communities in the rural Araucania Region. No one was hurt in the attacks. In October the National Prosecutors’ Office found the alleged arsonists did not meet the threshold for trial under the anti-terrorism law. The alleged perpetrators were charged with arson; the trial was still pending at the end of the year. CORMA pledged to develop a work plan to help provide peaceful solutions to the region’s societal conflict by bringing together churches, parishioners, community organizations, neighbors, workers, investors, and business owners. CORMA also donated in-kind goods to rebuild the churches. The regional government announced in April it would help to reconstruct the destroyed churches and initiated programs to train Catholic and evangelical Protestant churches in preventative security measures.

ONAR representatives regularly met with religious leaders with the stated aim of ensuring state institutions respected minority religious practices. In June ONAR published the first edition of an ethics code to facilitate a dialogue of mutual understanding among the country’s religious communities, public and private entities, labor leaders, and civil society. The ethics code asserts Chile’s identity as a secular state and outlines best practices through which civil society, the private sector, and religious institutions might demonstrate religious diversity and tolerance. The ethics code discusses suggestions for education, media outlets, and the environment, among other topics.

ONAR continued to work through the Interfaith Advisory Council, a roundtable organization comprising religious leaders representing the country’s religious communities, including Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and Bahais, among others. Their efforts were designed to facilitate and enhance interreligious dialogue within the country by establishing standing meetings among religious leaders and offering government space to host those conversations.

In June President Michelle Bachelet and ONAR hosted an interfaith iftar at the La Moneda presidential palace to support dialogue and promote interfaith understanding.

### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

While the Assemblies of God and the Interdenominational Regional Council of Pastors of Araucania publicly called on the authorities to improve their investigation into the eight church burnings, other churches and organizations did not make public statements. According to political sources, the church attacks appeared to fit into the pattern of protest and sabotage directed against a wide range of institutions and business interests in the Araucania Region, which also included trucks, farm equipment, and farm structures.

A soccer match in Santiago on June 8 between Club Israeliti, a Chilean-Jewish team, and Club Palestino, a Chilean-Palestinian team, ended in physical violence as xenophobic chants erupted and fans of the Chilean-Palestinian club rushed the field. Jewish community leaders filed a complaint with the public prosecutor, accusing the Club Palestino fans of anti-Semitic chants. Chilean-Palestinian leaders complained to authorities that the entrance to their community’s soccer field was marked with graffiti of the Star of David and the words “Palestine doesn’t exist, Arabs are terrorists.” Club Palestino denounced the graffiti, describing it as “cowardly aggression.” The president of the Jewish Community of Chile filed a complaint with the police against Club Palestino’s fans, condemned the vandalizing of Club Palestino’s stadium, and expressed the Jewish community’s solidarity with Chile’s Palestinian community.

Jewish community leaders expressed concern about other incidents of graffiti, including some marking Jewish homes as businesses, which they perceived as anti-Semitic, and graffiti that pledged support for Hitler. They also expressed concern about anti-Semitic flyers found in June at Universidad Concepcion and Universidad Catolica promoting white racial purity and denouncing immigration, interreligious marriage, and “racial degeneration.”

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials met regularly with ONAR officials, regional government leaders, and law enforcement to express concern about the impact of the church burnings on religious minorities in Araucania and neighboring regions.

The Ambassador and embassy officials met with religious leaders to discuss the status of religious minorities in the country, expressions of anti-Semitism, the impact of immigration on religious institutions, the impact of elections on religious institutions, security, and institutional cooperation among government and religious organizations. In August a senior embassy official participated in an interreligious dialogue between government officials and faith leaders, including members of the Jewish, Bahai, evangelical, and Catholic faiths, among others; ONAR; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

In June a senior embassy official hosted leaders of Muslim, Protestant, Jewish, Catholic, Bahai, and indigenous Mapuche communities at an interfaith iftar. The event celebrated religious diversity, interfaith dialogue, and religious tolerance, and sought to increase cooperation among religious organizations in light of the arson attacks in the Araucania Region. In December the Ambassador participated in a Hanukkah celebration hosted by President Bachelet and the Jewish Community of Chile. The event highlighted interreligious dialogue, democracy, solidarity, freedom of expression, equality, and education, among other topics. As part of the ceremony, the Ambassador, the presidential rabbi, and the minister of labor and social security lit a menorah candle in celebration of equality. The embassy celebrated International Religious Freedom Day and UN International Day for Tolerance with social media campaigns.

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