

2021 Report on International Religious Freedom: Colombia

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the right to profess one's religious beliefs. It prohibits discrimination based on religion. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) is responsible for formally recognizing churches, religious denominations, religious federations and confederations, and associations of religious ministers. On April 7, the Constitutional Court determined that an adolescent member of the Jehovah's Witnesses had the right to refuse a blood transfusion for medical purposes due to her religious beliefs and instead receive alternate methods of treatment. In July, the Constitutional Court ruled that the right to euthanasia – recognized in 1997 – applies not only to terminal patients, but also to those with "intense physical and mental suffering from bodily injury or serious and incurable disease." Roman Catholic Church leaders opposed the decision, describing euthanasia as a "serious offense to the dignity of life." The Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA) of the MOI completed several initiatives to foster better coordination between the central and local governments to promote religious freedom. The DRA promoted the implementation of 90 religious freedom measures throughout the country and provided technical assistance to officials by creating a Manual for Territorial Religious Liaisons. It also created religious freedom liaison positions in which government representatives serve as intermediaries between religious organizations and local and regional governments. The DRA began implementation of an agreement it signed in 2020 with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to gather information on the characteristics, needs, challenges, and contributions of religious organizations. Religious leaders expressed continued concern regarding a law requiring interagency commissions to evaluate requests for conscientious objector status. During a meeting with President Ivan Duque Marquez on July 7, youth representatives of the country's main religious communities and organizations signed a pact to advocate religious freedom and respect for all religions and beliefs. During the same meeting, the MOI launched an initiative to support the social, cultural, and educational work of religious groups and their organizations.

The Attorney General's Office (AGO) reported that there were no killings of religious figures. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and church representatives, however, reported that illegal armed groups continued to kill, threaten, or displace human rights defenders, including some religious leaders, for promoting human rights, supporting internally displaced persons, assisting with land restitution claims, and discouraging coca cultivation. Leaders of many religious groups continued to report that illegal armed groups, in particular the National Liberation Army, hindered peace and reconciliation programs.

The AGO investigated two cases involving alleged abuses of religious freedom and four cases involving vandalism of places of worship. The MOI also stated that several acts of vandalism against churches occurred during the year. The Confederation of Jewish Communities of Colombia (CJCC) expressed concern about antisemitic rhetoric and actions on social media after the CJCC met with a presidential candidate as part of a series of meetings with all presidential candidates. For example, social media included comments stating the Jewish community was "conspiring with communism."

According to media, on October 10, Martha Sepulveda, a self-described devout Catholic, was scheduled to become the first person in the country without a terminal prognosis to die by legally authorized euthanasia. On October 8, a private medical facility, which was scheduled to perform the procedure, determined that she was no longer eligible, as her condition had improved. A member of the national bishops' conference urged Sepulveda to "calmly reflect" on her decision. On October 27, a court in Medellín ruled that Sepulveda was entitled to die by euthanasia, with the procedure scheduled for early 2022. The Catholic Church, Mennonite Church, and other religious groups continued to conduct programs focused on religious tolerance, land rights, peace, and reconciliation. Faith-based and interfaith NGOs, including DiPaz and the Inter-Ecclesiastical Commission on Justice and Peace, continued to promote religious freedom and tolerance through their programs and community engagement. The Catholic Church and other religious organizations continued to distribute food packages to vulnerable communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

U.S. embassy officials raised issues of religious freedom, including conscientious objection to military service and the effect of illegal armed actors on religious practice, with the Human Rights Directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), the International Affairs Directorate of the AGO, and the DRA. Embassy officials discussed with the DRA public policies on religious freedom, including support for victims of conflict and other vulnerable populations. Embassy officials also met with representatives from a wide range of religious groups, including the Jewish and Muslim communities, Catholics, evangelical Protestants, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians, Mennonites, Baha'is, Greek Orthodox, and members of indigenous communities. In these meetings, embassy officials discussed issues related to the government's policies on religious freedom, conscientious objection, and antisemitism.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 50.4 million (midyear 2021). According to a 2017 survey by the NGO Latinobarometer, 73 percent of the population is Catholic, 14 percent Protestant, and 11 percent atheist or agnostic. Groups that together constitute less than 2 percent of the population include nondenominational worshipers, Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Church of God Ministry of Jesus Christ International, Mennonites, Baha'is, and Buddhists. There are between 85,000 and 100,000 Muslims, according to a 2018 Pew research study. According to Baha'i leaders, there are approximately 60,000 followers; a Buddhist representative estimates there are 9,000 adherents in the country. The CJCC estimates there are approximately 5,500 Jews. There is also a small population of adherents of animism and various syncretic beliefs.

Some religious groups are concentrated in certain geographical regions. Most of those who blend Catholicism with elements of African animism are Afro-Colombians and reside on the Pacific coast. Most Jews reside in major cities (approximately 70 percent in Bogota), most Muslims live on the Caribbean coast, and most adherents of indigenous animistic religions live in remote rural areas. A small Taoist community is located in a mountainous region of Santander Department.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and the right to profess one's religious beliefs. It prohibits discrimination based on religion. There is no official state church or religion, but the law says the state "is not atheist or agnostic, nor indifferent to Colombians' religious sentiment." The constitution states all religions and churches are equal before the law. A 1998 Constitutional Court ruling upheld the right of traditional authorities to enforce the observation of, and participation in, traditional religious beliefs and practices on indigenous reserves. Subsequent rulings refer to the 1998 decision to reaffirm the right of indigenous governors to prohibit the practice of non-indigenous religions on indigenous reserves. A concordat between the Holy See and the government, recognized and enforced by law, recognizes marriages performed by the Catholic Church, allows the Church to provide chaplaincy services, and exempts members of the Catholic clergy from compulsory public service, including military service. According to a court ruling, these provisions are constitutional as long as they apply to all religious groups, but the legal framework is not in place to extend them to all religious groups. The law prohibits any official government reference to a religious affiliation for the country.

The MOI is responsible for formally recognizing churches, religious denominations, religious federations and confederations, and associations of religious ministers, as well as keeping a public registry of religious organizations. Organizations formally recognized by the MOI may then confer this recognition, called "extended public recognition," to affiliated groups sharing the same beliefs. The application process requires submission of a formal request and basic organizational information, including copies of the organization's constitution and an estimate of the number of members. The government considers a religious group's total membership, its "degree of acceptance within society," and other factors, such as the organization's statutes and its required behavioral norms, when deciding whether to grant formal recognition. The MOI provides a free, internet-based registration process for religious and faith-based organizations seeking recognition. Formally recognized religious organizations may collect funds and receive donations, establish religious education institutions, and perform religious services, excluding marriages. Unregistered ones may perform religious activities without penalty but may not collect financial funds or receive private donations, which may be nonfinancial.

The government recognizes as legally binding marriages performed by the Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and 13 non-Catholic Christian denominations that are signatories to a 1997 public law agreement: the Council of the Assemblies of God, Christian Community Spring of Eternal Life, Christian Crusade Church, Quadrangular Christian Church, Church of God in Colombia, House on the Rock Integral Christian Church, United Pentecostal Church of Colombia, Denomination of the Pan-American Mission of Colombia, Pentecostal Church of God International Movement in Colombia, Seventh-day Adventist Church of Colombia, Wesleyan Church, Christian Church of Long Bridge, and the Federation Evangelical Council of Colombia. The agreement authorizes these religious groups to engage in activities such as marriages, funeral services, and spiritual assistance in prisons, hospitals, military facilities, and educational institutions. Under this agreement, members of religious groups that are neither signatories to the agreement nor affiliated with signatories must marry in a civil ceremony for the state to recognize the marriage. Religious groups not signatories to the 1997 public law may not provide chaplaincy services or conduct state-recognized marriages.

The constitution recognizes the right of parents to choose the education of their child, including religious instruction. The law states religious education shall be offered in accordance with laws protecting religious freedom, and it identifies the Ministry of Education as responsible for establishing guidelines for teaching religion within the public school curriculum. Religious groups, including those that have not acceded to the public law agreement, may establish their own schools, provided they comply with ministry requirements. A Constitutional Court ruling obligates schools to implement alternative accommodations for students based on their religion, which could include students at religious institutions opting out of prayers or religious lessons. The government does not provide subsidies for private schools run by religious organizations.

The penal code prohibits discrimination based on religious beliefs or violations of religious freedom, including physical or moral harm. It imposes a penalty of one to three years in prison and a fine of 10 to 15 times the monthly minimum wage, approximately 8.3 million to 12.4 million Colombian pesos (\$2,100-\$3,100).

A Constitutional Court ruling ruled that citizens, including members of indigenous communities, may be exempt from compulsory military service if they can demonstrate a serious and permanent commitment to religious principles that prohibit the use of force. Conscientious objectors who are exempt from military service may complete alternative, government-selected public service. The law requires that regional interagency commissions evaluate requests for conscientious objector status; commission members include representatives from the armed forces, the Inspector General's Office, and medical, psychological, and legal experts. By law, the National Commission of Conscientious Objection reviews any cases not resolved at the regional level. The law requires that every battalion or larger military unit designate an officer in charge of processing conscientious objector exemptions.

According to the law, all associations, foundations, and corporations declared as nonprofit organizations, including foundations supported by churches or religious organizations recognized by the MOI, must pay taxes. Churches and religious organizations recognized by the MOI are tax-exempt, but they must report their income and expenses to the National Tax and Customs Authority. According to a Constitutional Court ruling, the state may not seize the assets of non-Catholic churches in legal proceedings if the church meets the requirements for formal government recognition.

Foreign missionaries must possess a special visa, valid for up to two years. The MFA issues visas to foreign missionaries and religious group administrators, who are members of religious organizations officially recognized and registered with the MOI. When applying for a visa, foreign missionaries must have a certificate from either the MOI or church authorities confirming registration of their religious group with the MFA. Alternatively, they may produce a certificate issued by a registered religious group confirming the applicant's membership and mission in the country. The visa application also requires a letter issued by a legal representative of the religious group stating the organization accepts full financial responsibility for the expenses of the applicant and family, including funds for return to their country of origin or last country of residence. Applicants must explain the purpose of the proposed sojourn and provide proof of economic means. A Constitutional Court ruling stipulates that, although missionaries may work in the country, no group may impose forced religious conversion on members of indigenous communities.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

On April 7, the Constitutional Court determined that an adolescent member of the Jehovah's Witnesses had the right to refuse a blood transfusion for medical purposes due to her religious beliefs and instead receive alternate methods of treatment. The decision was made in relation to a

2020 case in which a hospital and the Administrative Court of the Cundinamarca Region had previously determined that blood transfusions could be required to be administered to patients in cases of “extreme urgency.”

On May 21, the Constitutional Court reiterated that government officials should refrain from actions that could be interpreted as violating the separation of church and state and instructed the Presidential Counsel for Communication to ensure that government authorities use social media appropriately.

On July 22, the Constitutional Court ruled that the right to euthanasia – recognized in 1997 – applies not only to terminal patients, but also to those with “intense physical or mental suffering from bodily injury or serious and incurable disease.” In response to the ruling, Catholic Church officials described euthanasia as a “serious offense to the dignity of life.”

The MOI reported there were 9,032 formally recognized religious organizations in the country at the end of the year, compared with 8,214 at the end of 2020. It received 723 applications for formal recognition of religious organizations, compared with 393 in 2020; approved 595, compared with 343 in 2020; and deferred or denied 15, compared with 12 in 2020. The MOI stated that the reason it deferred and denied petitions was because the applying entity failed to meet the legal requirements and/or because it failed to provide missing information during the year. The MOI stated it continued to review the remaining applications. According to the MOI, 99.4 percent of the applications were from evangelical Christian churches and the rest were from Muslim and Jewish entities. The MOI continued to give applicants who submitted incomplete applications or incorrect supporting documents 30 days to bring their applications into compliance. If the MOI deemed an application incomplete, it could deny the application; however, the applying organization could resubmit an application at any time, and the MOI indicated there was no waiting period to reapply.

The DRA provided support to the 32 departments to implement the National Public Policy of Religious Freedom and Worship adopted in 2018 to provide guarantees to exercise freedom of religion and worship. The policy also formally recognized religions and their affiliated organizations as managers of peace, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It further guaranteed coordination between the regions and the different levels of government to promote peacebuilding, reconciliation, and forgiveness with a view to recognizing victims of conflict in the country. As part of the initiative to support the policy, the DRA promoted the implementation of 90 public measures on religious freedom during the year. These included public campaigns to promote religious tolerance and nondiscrimination as well as efforts to strengthen communication between religious groups and government institutions at the national and regional levels. The DRA also provided technical assistance to officials by creating a Manual for Territorial Religious Liaisons containing guidelines to promote the protection of religious freedom. The DRA additionally provided guidelines to implement the Comprehensive Public Policy on Religious Freedom and Religious Groups for territorial entities. Passed in 1994, the policy regulates the right to freedom of religion and worship present in the constitution and addresses church-state relations and the legal status of non-Catholic religions.

During the year, the DRA created religious freedom liaison positions – government representatives to serve as liaisons between religious organizations and local and regional governments. These religious liaisons were appointed in 29 departments, including in the municipalities of Chinchina, Caldas; Yopal, Casanare; Tierra Alta, Cordoba; Manizales, Caldas; Pasto, Narino; and the Departments of Antioquia, Boyaca, and Meta.

The DRA took steps to implement an international cooperation agreement with the UNDP signed in 2020 to study the religious community and gather relevant information regarding the characteristics, needs, challenges, and contributions of religious groups. The goal was to implement public policies on religious freedom in a more detailed way and articulate actions between the religious community and the public sector to achieve common objectives. During the year, the study involved the departments of Bolivar, Norte de Santander, Risaralda, and Valle del Cauca. The project conducted 1,436 surveys that examined social, cultural, educational, coexistence, and peace and reconciliation elements. According to the survey data, the religious community assisted vulnerable populations such as victims of conflict, women, the elderly, children, adolescents, and migrants. The agreement with the UNDP also supported the training of religious community employees and public officials to focus on respect for religious freedom and empowering religious groups in the exercise of their rights. By year’s end, 2,000 persons had taken the training.

According to the DRA and religious leaders, the MOI continued implementing its public policy goal of raising awareness of the role of religious groups in supporting victims of conflict and other vulnerable populations, as well as strengthening interreligious cooperation and tolerance at the local level through structured interfaith dialogues and technical assistance. In May, the DRA created a dialogue commission with the Catholic Church to fulfill a legal mandate that a roundtable be created with the Church to adopt public policies concerning the Church’s status. The DRA also promoted more than 200 interreligious engagements through committees, roundtables, and councils, and it led

one training workshop on the legal framework of religious freedom. On June 25, the DRA held an educational campaign through digital media on religious freedom, tolerance, nondiscrimination, and stigmatization or persecution for religious reasons. It also supported an interreligious promotional campaign called “As Born Between Us” to support migrants in the country.

President Duque commemorated National Day of Religious Freedom on July 4, when he spoke in support of outreach and initiatives highlighting religious freedom. By year’s end, 90 municipalities had adopted public policies on religious freedom. The policies included public campaigns to promote religious tolerance and nondiscrimination as well as efforts to strengthen communication between religious groups and government institutions at the national and regional levels. Religious freedom and respect for religious groups were included in new territorial development plans for 2020-23 in 16 of the country’s 32 departments and 24 municipalities. The national outreach programs continued to prioritize integrating the religious community into public policy discussions, including on how to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, the increasing number of Venezuelans residing in the country, and how to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government supplied hundreds of aid packages to humanitarian and religious programs.

The Ministry of National Education urged preschool, elementary, and middle school educational institutions to foster peaceful resolution to conflicts involving religious belief.

According to religious groups, individuals continued to have difficulty obtaining exemptions from military service on religious grounds. Religious leaders expressed continued concern regarding a law requiring interagency commissions to evaluate requests for conscientious objector status. Religious organizations reported mixed enforcement of the conscientious objector law, stating that some objectors were still required to serve in the military, although they were exempt from carrying a weapon. The Ministry of Defense reported that by year’s end, it had approved 61 of 112 applications seeking conscientious objector status on religious grounds.

The CJCC continued to express concern about antisemitic rhetoric and actions on social media after the CJCC met with a presidential candidate in May as part of a series of meetings with all presidential candidates. For example, social media included comments stating the Jewish community was “conspiring with communism” and committing “treason against the homeland.” In November, Colombian National Police (CNP) cadets from the Simon Bolivar Police Academy in Tulua wore Nazi attire and displayed paraphernalia with swastikas at a ceremony the police claimed was to honor Germany. President Duque condemned the incident, stating that any demonstration that uses or refers to symbols associated with those responsible for the Holocaust was unacceptable. The Defense Ministry similarly denounced this act, and the police dismissed the head of the academy. The national police suspended two senior officers at the academy.

The Colombian National Police, through the Protection and Special Services Directorate, continued to provide security for religious sites, and the National Protection Unit of the MOI provided personal security to individuals deemed at risk.

In connection with the observance of National Day of Religious Freedom, the MOI and regional governments held forums and other events to educate the public on the significance of the holiday and the new public policy to build bridges with religious organizations. On July 7, President Duque met with youth representatives of the country’s main religious communities and organizations. During the meeting, the youth representatives signed a pact to promote the Integral Public Policy of Religious Freedom that advocates youth supporting the common purpose of religious freedom. President Duque highlighted the inclusion of religious freedom in the constitution, stating that all religions and belief systems have the same rights, freedoms, and obligations. The MOI also launched the first knowledge repository of interreligious initiatives, a formal mechanism established to recognize and highlight practices of religious and social entities and to support the social, cultural, and educational work of religions entities and their organizations.

ACTIONS BY FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

The AGO reported that there were no killings of religious figures, compared with three killings of religious figures in 2020. NGOs and church representatives, however, reported that illegal armed groups continued to kill, threaten, or displace human rights defenders, including some religious leaders, for promoting human rights, assisting internally displaced persons, assisting with land restitution claims, and discouraging coca cultivation.

During the year, leaders of many religious groups continued to report that illegal armed groups, in particular the National Liberation Army, hindered peace and reconciliation programs, including those led by religious institutions, such as the Catholic Church, in rural areas with a limited state presence.

The AGO reported four cases of threats by members of illegal armed groups against religious leaders and one case of displacement of a religious organization leader, compared with nine threats and 16 attacks the previous year.

The Christian NGO Open Doors' annual report for 2021, released on January 19, 2022, showed an increase from the previous year in persecution and attacks by criminal and guerilla elements against Christians for denouncing corruption and violence perpetrated by such groups, with greater prevalence in remote areas of the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

During the year, the AGO investigated two cases of abuses of religious freedom in the municipalities of Soledad, Atlantico and Barrancabermeja, Santander. In addition, the AGO investigated four cases of vandalism reported in Ayapel, Cordoba; La Plata, Huila; Cucuta, Norte de Santander; and Floridablanca, Santander. The MOI also stated that several acts of vandalism against churches occurred during the year.

The DRA said acts of vandalism towards two churches occurred in the departments of Tolima in March and Valle del Cauca in May. In addition, according to the Colombia Episcopal Conference, groups of women in favor of legalizing abortion vandalized the Catholic Cathedral of Ibague and the St. Francis Church of Bogota on March 8, International Women's Day. The women also damaged the physical structures and harassed church members. In both cases, police were present but made no arrests.

According to the Colombian Episcopal Conference representing the Catholic Church, some state and private schools encouraged students to limit visible expressions of faith. On February 17, Ash Wednesday, the French School in Pereira required three girls to wash the ash cross off their foreheads to enter the school.

According to media, Martha Sepulveda, a self-described devout Catholic, was scheduled to become the first person in the country without a terminal prognosis to die by legally authorized euthanasia on October 10. On October 8, the private Colombian Institute of Pain (Incodol), which was scheduled to perform the procedure, determined that she was no longer eligible because her condition had improved. Sepulveda's family planned to appeal the decision. A member of the national bishops' conference urged Sepulveda to "calmly reflect" on her decision and invited all Catholics to pray that God would grant her mercy. On October 27, a court in Medellin ruled that Sepulveda was entitled to die by euthanasia, with the procedure scheduled for early 2022.

During the year, the Catholic Church, Mennonite Church, and other religious groups continued to conduct programs focused on religious tolerance, land rights, peace, and reconciliation. Faith-based and interfaith NGOs, including DiPaz and the Inter-Ecclesiastical Commission on Justice and Peace, continued to promote religious freedom and tolerance through their programs and community engagement.

DiPaz, which includes the Presbyterian Church, Lutheran Evangelical Church, Council of the Assemblies of God, and various NGOs, focused on advancing the peace process in the country. In a July 16 letter to the United Nations Security Council, DiPaz called on the international community to urge the government to resume the full implementation of the 2016 peace accord that ended the conflict between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and strengthen channels of dialogue to resolve societal issues. The World Council of Churches and Action by Churches Alliance joined DiPaz in supporting the search for sustainable peace in the country. The letter appealed for continued and further action to promote a genuine and sustainable peace for all the individuals in the country, especially the most marginalized communities and those most affected as victims of violence. Several regional and global organizations, including the World Communion of Reformed Churches, Presbyterian Church, Alliance of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches of Latin America, Regional Ecumenical Advisory and Service Center, World Student Christian Federation, QONAKUY (a phrase of the aboriginal Quechua people meaning "to join with another is to share the best of oneself"), and the American Lutheran Church, endorsed the letter.

The Catholic Church and other religious organizations distributed food packages during the COVID-19 pandemic to all in need regardless of religion.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials discussed conscientious objection to military service and the effect of the actions of guerrilla and illegal armed groups on religious freedom with the Human Rights Directorate of the MFA, the International Affairs Directorate of the AGO, and the DRA. Embassy officials discussed with the DRA public policies on religious freedom, including support for victims of conflict and other vulnerable populations.

The embassy highlighted on social media U.S. collaboration with the government and civil society to promote respect for religious pluralism and diversity of belief and that condemned antisemitism and highlighted local events advocating for religious freedom and tolerance. The Ambassador issued a statement denouncing the CNP event involving Nazi paraphernalia and praising the government's quick action in response. Embassy officials met virtually with representatives from a wide range of religious groups, including Catholics, evangelical Protestants, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians, Mennonites, Baha'is, the CJCC, Greek Orthodox, Bogota's Muslim community, representatives from a coalition of indigenous religious groups, and from other faith-based NGOs, including Global Ministries, the Colombian Evangelical Council's Peace Commission, and the Colombian Confederation of Religious Freedom, Conscience and Worship. Embassy officials discussed the government's policies on religious freedom, conscientious objection, antisemitism, and the groups' role in combating religious intolerance and support for the 2016 peace accord.

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