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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Colombia

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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.

During the year, the government enacted two new laws relating to religious freedom. On June 6, President Gustavo Petro signed Decree 922 of 2023, granting eight additional religious groups authority to engage in activities such as marriages, funeral services, and spiritual assistance in public and private institutions. In May, the President signed Law 2294 of 2023 adopting the 2022-26 National Development Plan. The law created the National System of Freedom of Religion, Worship and Conscience; Social Dialogue; Total Peace; Equality and Nonstigmatization (SINALIBREC), which directs national and territorial government entities, coordinated by the MOI, to implement public policies advancing religious freedom, worship and conscience and strengthen the capacities of religious organizations. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA) created the Interreligious Humanitarian Network to respond to humanitarian crises and also created the Interreligious Rural Network to strengthen the MOI's institutional relationship with religious organizations to maintain peace and freedom of religion and belief in rural conflict areas. President Petro posted on social media numerous times following the Hamas October 7 terrorist attack on Israel, comparing the Israeli re-

to the Nazi regime. The Confederation of Jewish Communities of Colombia (CJCC) denounced the postings.

The Attorney General's Office (AGO) reported that nonstate actors killed four religious leaders during the year, compared with three in 2022. In addition, the office investigated two cases of forced displacement of religious leaders in Putumayo and an unknown location.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and church representatives reported 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 nonstate groups, in particular the U.S.-designated terrorist organization the National Liberation Army (ELN), hindered peace and reconciliation programs and at times sought monthly extortion payments in rural areas.

The government reported two criminal investigations were underway for damage or injury to individuals or places of worship in Medellin and Nechi at the end of the year. Following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel and the Israeli military response, the CJCC reported an increase in antisemitic comments and calls for expulsion of Jews via social media. In October, two individuals attempted to break into the Abou Bakr Alsiddiq Mosque, and according to witnesses, the perpetrators demanded Muslims leave the country. The Catholic Church, Mennonite Church, and other religious groups continued to conduct programs focused on religious tolerance, land rights, peace, and reconciliation. Throughout the year, the Catholic Church served as a prominent mediator in peace talks between the government and certain illegal armed groups, including the ELN. Faith-based and interfaith NGOs continued to promote religious freedom and tolerance through their programs and community engagement.

U.S. embassy officials discussed with members of the DRA and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) Human Rights Directorate, the Ministry of Defense's (MOD) Human Rights Directorate, and the AGO the government's policies on religious freedom, including antisemitism. In May, a senior embassy official delivered remarks at an event focusing on the important role of religious leaders in advocating religious freedom and other human rights. The U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism publicly condemned President Petro's statements that likened Israel's response to the attacks by Hamas to actions of the Nazi regime. The Special Envoy described the statements as antisemitic rhetoric, consistent with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 49.3 million (midyear 2023). According to a 2023 survey by the NGO Latinobarometer, 64 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 17 percent Protestant, 2 percent atheist or agnostic, and 14 percent practices no religion. Groups that together constitute less than 2 percent of the population include nondenominational worshipers, Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), members of 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, the latest available. According to Baha'i leaders, there are approximately 60,000 followers; a Buddhist representative estimates there are 9,000 adherents. The CJCC estimates there are approximately 5,500 Jews. A small population of Indigenous persons blend syncretic beliefs with traditional spiritual practices and ancestral religious beliefs. A small percentage of the population practices LaVeyan Satanism, the doctrines of which are based on materialism, rejecting the existence of supernatural beings, body-soul dualism, and life after death. Adherents do not believe that Satan literally exists and do not worship him.

Some religious groups are concentrated in specific geographic regions. Most of those who blend Catholicism with elements of African traditional beliefs 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 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. The law that implements the decree on freedom of religion and worship, however, does not include protections for Satanism, or magical, superstitious, or spiritualistic practices. 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 cite 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 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.

Decree 922 of 2023 went into effect on June 6, granting eight additional religious groups permission to engage in activities such as marriages, funeral services, and spiritual assistance in prisons, hospitals, military facilities, and educational institutions. The public law of 1997, which previously governed these activities, remains in effect for the churches listed within it. Under the new decree, the government recognizes as legally binding marriages performed by the Catholic Church, the Jewish community, and 20 non-Catholic Christian denominations that are signatories to a 1997 public law agreement. These denominations include 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, the Federation Evangelical Council of Colombia, Christian Church Christian Business Center Faith in Action, Universal Anglican Apostolic Church Priestly Fraternity "The Good Shepherd", Anglican Catholic Church, World Revival Center Church, Inter-American Evangelical Church, Old Church of Colombia, and Church of God Ministerial of Jesus Christ International. One church included in the new decree did not request permission to conduct marriages. Under the decree, members of religious groups that are neither signatories to the decrees nor affiliated with signatories must marry in a civil ceremony for the state to recognize the marriage. Religious groups not signatories to the 1997 or 2023 public laws may not provide chaplaincy services or conduct state-recognized marriages.

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 ministry 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 funds or receive nonfinancial private donations.

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 pesos (\$2,100 to \$3,200).

A Constitutional Court ruling determined citizens 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. Other rulings established that members of Indigenous communities are not mandated to serve in the military. 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 are eligible to apply for two types of religious visas within the category of tourist visas, either as religious leaders and personnel (valid for two years) or religious students/volunteers (valid for one year). 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 provide a certificate from either the MOI or church authorities confirming registration of their religious group with the MFA. Alternatively, they may provide 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 activities 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

During the year, the government enacted two laws relating to religious freedom. Decree 922, enacted on June 6, granted eight additional religious groups authority to engage in activities such as marriages, funeral services, and spiritual assistance in public and private institutions.

Law 2294 of 2023, enacted in May, adopted the 2022-26 National Development Plan. The law also created SINALIBREC, which directs national and territorial entities, coordinated by the MOI, to execute the National Public Policy of Religious Freedom, Worship and Conscience, increasing dialogue and engagement with religious organizations and strengthening the capacities of religious organizations to promote conflict resolution and peace building.

The MOI reported there were 10,934 formally recognized religious organizations in the country at year's end, compared with 10,081 in 2022 and 9,032 at the end of 2021. By the end of the year, it had received 837 applications for formal recognition of religious organizations, compared with 1,095 in 2022; approved 864, compared with 788 in 2022; and deferred or denied 241, compared with 307 in 2022. The ministry stated the most common reason it deferred or denied petitions during the year was because the applying entity failed to meet legal requirements or failed to provide missing information. According to the MOI, 99.7 percent of the applications were from evangelical Christian churches. 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. The applying organization could resubmit an application at any time, and the MOI indicated there was no waiting period to reapply.

The DRA continued to provide support to the 32 geographical departments to implement the National Public Policy of Religious Freedom and Worship and Conscience to guarantee freedom of religion and worship. As part of the initiative to support the policy, the DRA continued to promote implementation of public measures on religious freedom. These included campaigns to reduce stigmatization of religious communities, promote increased reporting of discrimination and violations of religious freedom laws, and improve dialogue between religious groups and government institutions at the national and regional levels.

The DRA also created the Interreligious Humanitarian Network, comprising representatives from religious institutions and the public and private sectors, to respond to humanitarian crises. Similarly, the DRA established the Interreligious Rural Network to strengthen the MOI's institutional relationship with religious organizations to maintain peace and freedom of religion and belief, in rural conflict areas.

The DRA reported taking steps toward fully implementing an international cooperation agreement with the UN Development Program signed in 2020 to study the religious sector and gather relevant information regarding the characteristics, needs, challenges, and contributions of religious groups. The agreement was designed to fulfill initiatives from the Bank of Interreligious Initiatives, which is an MOI effort to encourage the religious sector to

engage actively in social and sustainable development programs. The DRA held dialogues with various leaders of religious communities facilitated by the National Table of Religious Affairs, an MOI-led entity for convening the government and civil society organizations of all faiths to discuss issues of religious freedom. The DRA also conducted programs focused on religious tolerance, land rights, peace, and reconciliation.

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.

In cooperation with the National Administrative Department of Statistics and the National Learning Service, the DRA completed the process of incorporating labor codes to include religious professionals in the Unique Classification of Occupations for Colombia. According to the DRA, this will further facilitate formal recognition of religious professions and provision of related benefits such as enhanced access to banking and credit for religious professionals.

On July 4, President Petro commemorated the National Day of Religious Freedom while addressing an audience of religious leaders. He highlighted the enactment of Decree 922 and the relationship between religious freedom, solidarity, and peace. President Petro said, “No one will be persecuted for their religious convictions.”

National outreach programs continued to prioritize integrating the religious community into public policy discussions, including peacebuilding efforts related to the 2016 Peace Accord, new dialogues with illegal armed groups, and the provision of assistance to migrants displaced due to the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela.

A December 2022 report by the NGO CSW (formerly known as Christian Solidarity Worldwide) on Indigenous freedom of religion or belief, stated that on some Indigenous reserves, Indigenous authorities prohibited the practice of “non-traditional” religions. The report stated that some members of minority religious groups living in Indigenous reserves did not experience the same legal protections to freedom of religion or belief as elsewhere in the country when practicing their faith.

According to religious and peace 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 some objectors were still required to serve in the military,

although they were exempted from carrying a weapon. The MOD reported that at year's end, it had approved 90 of 171 applications seeking conscientious objector status on religious grounds.

The MFA estimated at the end of the year there were 4,870 active visas granted to religious workers, a cumulative number of issuances since 2021, given the two-year validity of such visas. During the year, the MFA processed 2,056 visa applications for religious missionaries, of which 27 were rejected for not complying with documentation requirements. The ministry stated the rejections were not due to religious reasons. Effective July 22, the government implemented a revised process for reviewing visa applications of persons conducting religious activities, replacing it with a process within the system for adjudicating applications for tourist visas.

The National Police, through the Protection and Special Services Directorate, and the National Protection Unit of the MOI, continued to provide security as needed for religious sites and group members while conducting religious activities. Following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, the MOI sent a letter to the National Police requesting assistance to prevent attacks against the Muslim community and its places of worship, specifically citing the increased risks to Muslims following the attack. The National Protection Unit monitored the security situation of the Jewish community but did not issue any security advisories.

In April, the then director of the Colombian National Police, General Henry Sanabria, described to a press outlet his use of prayer and exorcism rituals during police operations in addition to comments against abortion, which was legalized in 2022. Following his comments and public criticism, the MOD initiated an internal investigation to determine whether Sanabria had inappropriately allowed his Catholic religious beliefs and related actions to infringe upon his duties. Seventeen days after Sanabria's comments, President Petro removed him from his post without public comment on the reason.

The government reported two criminal investigations were underway for damage or injury to individuals or places of worship in Medellin and Nechi at the end of the year.

A Bucaramanga police officer and follower of LaVeyan Satanism filed a lawsuit for the right to keep his hair long in accordance with a provision of the LeVeyan Bible, which he said encourages followers to do so. In October, the 10th Administrative Court of Bucaramanga denied the suit, concluding that freedom of expression cannot always be protected and cited a related regulation on uniforms.

President Petro used social media numerous times following Hamas' terrorist attack against Israel. He compared the actions of the Israeli government to the Nazi regime. The CJCC strongly criticized President Petro's social media postings for failing to denounce the Hamas attack and called the comparison with the Nazi regime "disgraceful."

ACTIONS BY FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

The AGO investigated four homicides of religious leaders. One of the homicides was by nonstate actors in Antioquia, and details regarding the remaining three were not available from investigators. In addition, the office investigated two cases of forced displacement of religious leaders, one in Putumayo; additional details were not available in the second case. The office reported 18 cases of threats against religious leaders or related investigations during the year. The government recognized that such cases were underreported within their case management system, which did not disaggregate for types of threats or harassment when victims were not specifically identified as religious practitioners.

Leaders of many religious groups continued to report that illegal armed nonstate actors, particularly the ELN, 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 Catholic Church supported peace negotiations between the Petro government and the ELN as a "permanent accompanier" – an organization whose main task is to accompany and encourage the process and maintain relationships with the negotiators from both sides – during five rounds of negotiations throughout the year. During the negotiations, Church participants advocated humanitarian relief for communities, a key point of discussion. The Church also served as a facilitator to resolve cases of kidnapping by illegal armed groups. Negotiations between the government and illegal armed groups continued at the end of the year.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Colombian Episcopal Conference (CEC) reported an attempted assassination of a parish priest in Caldon, Cauca, on July 2. According to press, the priest was active in the peace building process in an area significantly impacted by territorial disputes between armed groups and was targeted in the attempt. The CEC reported additional threats by unidentified

perpetrators toward a bishop in Buenaventura, Valle de Cauca, and against other personnel employed by religious institutions in the Departments (states) of Arauca and Antioquia.

Religious communities reported several acts of vandalism against places of worship, especially those of the Catholic Church, to local authorities. The government reported two criminal investigations were underway for damage or injury to individuals or places of worship in Antioquia.

Following the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, the CJCC reported an increase in antisemitic comments and calls for expulsion of Jews via social media. Unknown individuals painted antisemitic graffiti in multiple locations around Bogota including outside the Israeli and U.S. embassies. Despite the increase in antisemitic language, CJCC officials said the community had not received any physical threats.

On October 17, two individuals attempted to break into Bogota's Abou Bakr Alsiddiq Mosque and caused minor damage to the building's exterior. Witnesses said the perpetrators demanded Muslims leave the country because they were "only here to cause problems." Although the individuals were not apprehended, mosque leadership reported police quickly responded to the incident and afterwards maintained higher levels of security in the area around the mosque. Despite the October 17 incident, they had reportedly not observed an increase in harassment or threats against Muslims following the October 7 Hamas attack.

During the year, religious communities, including the Catholic and Mennonite Churches, held programs focused on religious tolerance, land rights, peace, and reconciliation.

According to CSW, Indigenous individuals of religious minority groups reported experiencing varying forms of discrimination by Indigenous community members and leaders. In some cases, local Indigenous councils blocked access to social and health systems for Indigenous individuals practicing non-Indigenous religions. CSW stated the organization was aware of the displacement of 46 families due to religious freedom issues since 2016.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism condemned President Petro's statements that likened Israel's actions in its response to the attacks by Hamas to actions of the Nazi regime, statements considered as antisemitic. On October 12, the Special Envoy

posted on social media, “We strongly condemn President Petro’s statements and call on him to condemn Hamas, a designated terrorist organization, for its barbaric murder of Israeli men, women and children.” The Special Envoy also called the statements antisemitic rhetoric, consistent with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance working definition of antisemitism. The embassy reposted the statement in Spanish.

Embassy officials continued to discuss the actions of illegal armed groups as restricting religious freedom with representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the International Affairs Directorate of the AGO, and the DRA. Embassy officials discussed with the DRA public policies to promote religious freedom, including support for victims of conflict and other vulnerable populations.

Throughout the year, embassy officials discussed with members of the DRA and the MFA’s Human Rights Directorate, the MOD’s Human Rights Directorate, and the AGO the government’s policies on religious freedom, antisemitism, conscientious objection to military service, the role of religious NGOs in combating religious intolerance, and support for the implementation of the 2016 Peace Accord.

On January 27, embassy officials participated in an event focused on ending antisemitism to honor Holocaust Remembrance Day and discussed with religious representatives efforts to address antisemitism and discrimination in the country.

On May 16, a senior embassy official made remarks at a public event hosted by the Independent Absolute Renewal Movement political party. The official stated, “We prioritize [freedom of religion and belief] because we know that societies are better off when their citizens can choose how and when they practice their beliefs.” The remarks recognized and commended the advocacy of religious leaders of all faiths for religious freedom and the fifth anniversary of the government’s public policy for religious freedom and cited the importance of the support of religious leaders for human rights policies in the country. Afterwards, the embassy highlighted the event on social media.

On October 18, embassy officials hosted a meeting with representatives from the DRA, AGO, and MFA, as well as with leaders from religious groups, including Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Jewish, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Greek Orthodox, and Church of Jesus Christ communities. During the meeting, embassy officials underscored the U.S. commitment to supporting religious freedom and discussed ways to address challenges and threats facing religious communities. Participants agreed that they felt free to

practice their faiths but discussed threats by armed groups and inconsistent implementation of government policies nationwide.

On October 20, embassy officials met with representatives of the CJCC to discuss the security of the Jewish community following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel.

On November 8, embassy officials met with the leader of the Abou Bakr Alsiddiq Mosque in Bogota, a local Muslim community leader, to discuss religious freedom generally and the community's concerns following the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel. Embassy officials reiterated the U.S. government condemns all threats to religious communities.

During the year, the embassy used social media to recognize the importance of the freedom of religion and belief. On October 27, the embassy expressed support on social media for strengthening religious freedom in the country, highlighting the embassy-hosted October 18 religious freedom-focused meeting as well as meetings with religious leaders from Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim communities.

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