



2014 Report on International Religious Freedom - El Salvador

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Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion. It states all people are equal before the law and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The constitution grants official recognition to the Catholic Church and states other religious groups may also apply for official recognition. In June the Legislative Assembly amended the constitution to recognize indigenous spiritual beliefs.

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

U.S. embassy officials met periodically with government officials and religious leaders to discuss and promote religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 6.1 million (July 2014 estimate). According to a May survey by the Institute of Public Opinion of the University of Central America, approximately 50 percent of the population identifies as Roman Catholic and 34 percent as Protestant. The survey states 14 percent have no religious affiliation. Groups that together constitute less than 3 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishnas, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). A small segment of the population adheres to indigenous religious beliefs. Some people of indigenous descent mix indigenous beliefs with other religions such as Catholicism.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the free exercise of religion. It states all persons are equal before the law and prohibits discrimination based on religion. In June the Legislative Assembly amended the constitution to recognize the existence and the rights of indigenous people, including indigenous spiritual beliefs.

The penal code imposes criminal sentences of six months to two years on individuals who publicly offend or insult the religious beliefs of others, or damage or destroy religious objects. If such acts are carried out for the purpose of gaining media attention, sentences increase to one to three years. Repeat offenders face prison sentences of three to eight years. There have been no prosecutions under this law.

The constitution requires the president, cabinet ministers, vice ministers, Supreme Court justices, judges, governors, the attorney general, the public defender, and other senior government officials to be laypersons. Religious leaders may not belong to political parties. The electoral code requires judges of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal and members of municipal councils to be laypersons.

The constitution grants official recognition to the Catholic Church and states other religious groups may also apply for official recognition by registering with the government. To obtain official recognition, a religious group must apply through the Office of the Director General for Nonprofit Associations and Foundations (DGFASFL) within the Ministry of Governance. The group must present its constitution and bylaws describing the type of organization, location of its offices, its goals and principles, requirements for membership, function of its ruling bodies, and assessments or dues. DGFASFL analyzes the group's constitution and bylaws to ensure they are in compliance with applicable law. Upon approval, the group's constitution and bylaws are published in the official gazette. DGFASFL does not maintain records on religious groups once it approves their status. Although religious groups may operate without registering with the government, registration provides tax-exempt status and facilitates activities requiring official permits, such as building churches. The law grants tax-exempt status to all officially recognized religious groups and exempts donations to officially recognized groups from taxation.

By law, the Ministry of Governance has authority to register, regulate, and oversee the finances of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), non-Catholic churches, and other religious groups. The law specifically exempts the Catholic Church from registration requirements.

Noncitizens present in the country primarily to proselytize must obtain a special residence visa for religious activities and may not proselytize while on a visitor or tourist visa.

Public education is secular. The constitution grants the right to establish private schools, and private religious schools operate without government interference. Parents have the right to choose whether their children receive religious education. Public schools may not deny admittance to any student based on religion. All private schools, whether religious or secular, must meet the same standards to obtain Ministry of Education approval.

Government Practices

There were 157 new requests during the year for registration of religious groups, of which 82 were approved, 75 were pending, and none were denied.

The Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights reported it had not received notice of any cases of alleged violations of religious freedom since 2010.

The Secretariat of Culture assisted an indigenous community to archive and preserve documents dating back to the 1600s. The documents detailed daily religious life for this group, which combines aspects of Catholicism with indigenous spiritual beliefs.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Baptist, Evangelical, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist leaders participated in the Council of Religions for Peace. The Lutheran Church promoted indigenous activities and spirituality by providing a venue for indigenous community members to gather. These events frequently celebrated indigenous culture and spirituality.

The faith-based NGO Cristosal hosted a viewing of a documentary about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals coming out to their families and churches. At the event, the Episcopal Archbishop of San Salvador stated everyone had a right to worship, including members of the LGBT community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the ombudsman for human rights. An embassy officer discussed religious freedom in the indigenous community with the national director for indigenous people and cultural diversity at the Secretariat of Culture. An embassy officer reviewed the registration process for religious groups with DGFASFL. Embassy officials discussed religious freedom with the faith-based NGO Cristosal and a spokesman for the Jewish community in San Salvador.