

Title	2010 Report on International Religious Freedom - Guatemala
Publisher	United States Department of State
Country	Guatemala
Publication Date	17 November 2010
Cite as	United States Department of State, <i>2010 Report on International Religious Freedom - Guatemala</i> , 17 November 2010, available at: http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4cf2d097c.html [accessed 19 July 2011]
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2010 Report on International Religious Freedom - Guatemala

[Covers the period from July 1, 2009, to June 30, 2010]

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 42,043 square miles and a population of 14.3 million, based on the 2002 census projections for 2010. According to 2002 official census data, the indigenous population is 43 percent of the total, although unofficial estimates are higher.

There is no official census of religious affiliation. The Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference of Guatemala estimated that 65 to 70 percent of the population is Catholic (2010). Alianza Evangelica, the official umbrella organization for Protestants, estimated that 35 to 40 percent of the population is Protestant. The largest Protestant group is the Full Gospel Church, followed by the Assemblies of God, the Central American Church, and the Prince of Peace Church, as well as many independent evangelical groups. There are Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, Seventh-day Adventists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and Jehovah's Witnesses. Jews (approximately 2,000) and a small Muslim population reside primarily in Guatemala City. Jewish community leaders reported declining numbers due to emigration, especially to the United States, Canada, and Israel. Catholics noted a reduction in numbers as some Catholics converted to Protestantism. These trends did not have a significant effect on the religious composition of the country.

Catholics and Protestants are present throughout the country, and their adherents are found among all major ethnic groups and political parties. According to leaders of Mayan spiritual organizations and Catholic and Protestant missionaries, many indigenous

Catholics and some Protestants also practice some form of indigenous spiritual ritual.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

There is no state religion; however, the constitution recognizes explicitly the distinct legal personality of the Catholic Church.

During the Spanish colonial period, some Catholic churches were built on sacred Mayan sites. Mayan spiritual leaders continued to use some of these locations to practice syncretic forms of worship. The law permits Mayan spirituality groups to conduct religious ceremonies at Mayan historical sites on government-owned property.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter, and Christmas. The Virgin of the Assumption is the patron saint of Guatemala City, and the Feast of the Assumption is a local holiday.

The government neither establishes requirements for religious recognition nor imposes registration requirements for believers to worship together. The government requires religious organizations as well as nonreligious associations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to register as legal entities to conduct business such as renting or purchasing premises, entering into contracts, and enjoying tax-exempt status. While the government charges a small one-time registration fee for NGOs, it waives that fee for religious groups.

Due to its historical presence since colonial times, the Catholic Church does not have to register as a legal entity; the constitution recognizes it as such. Any other religious group may file a copy of its bylaws and a list of its initial membership with the Ministry of Government to receive formal recognition. The group must have at least 25 initial members, and the bylaws must reflect an intention to pursue religious objectives. Applications are rejected only if the organization does not appear to be devoted to a religious objective, appears intent on undertaking illegal activities, or engages in activities that appear likely to threaten public order. There were no reports that the government rejected any group's application during the reporting period; however, some Protestant leaders alleged that the application process could be lengthy.

Foreign missionaries must obtain tourist visas, which are issued for renewable periods of three months. After renewing their tourist visas once, they may apply for temporary residence. Specific missionary visas are neither issued nor required.

The government does not subsidize religious groups. The constitution permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools. There is no national framework for determining the nature or content of this religious instruction; when provided, it tends to be programmed at the local level. The Ministry of Education consulted with religious groups on the integration of general values focusing on good citizenship, although not specific religious teachings, into school curriculums.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

Registered religious entities are legally exempt from taxes. Protestant leaders noted that local officials sometimes required their churches to pay property taxes.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The interreligious movement focused on discussion of societal concerns rather than interfaith discourse. Representatives of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and traditional Mayan spirituality groups participated in the Interreligious Dialogue and the Foro Guatemala to discuss societal and political topics. Evangelical Protestant churches were split between a majority group, which avoided interreligious engagement, and a minority group, which actively promoted an interreligious and multicultural viewpoint.

Mayan spiritual leaders continued to report widespread disagreements with evangelical Protestants and, to a lesser extent, charismatic Catholics. Protestant churches historically have been less tolerant of indigenous practices than the Catholic Church, whose approach in many areas of the country is to tolerate traditional practice not directly in conflict with Catholic dogma.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officials, including the ambassador, met on various occasions with leaders of major religious groups as well as faith-based NGOs. Embassy officials promoted dialogue between leaders of diverse religious communities and Mayan and ladino groups within civil society.
