



Document #2091870

USDOS – US Department of State (Author)

2022 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.

During the year, the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DRA) of the MOI completed initiatives to foster better coordination between the central and local governments to promote religious freedom. The DRA, under the MOI's jurisdiction, coordinated dialogues with different leaders of religious communities facilitated by the National Table of Religious Affairs. Religious leaders expressed continued concern regarding a law requiring interagency commissions to evaluate requests for military conscientious objector status. On July 6, then President Iván Duque commemorated the National Day of Religious Freedom with a speech in support of outreach and initiatives highlighting religious freedom.

The Attorney General's Office (AGO) reported that nonstate actors killed three religious leaders during the year, compared with none in 2021. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and church representatives 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 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 Colombian Episcopal Conference (CEC) stated that on February 8, members of illegal armed groups threatened Monsignor Rubén Darío Jaramillo Montoya, bishop of Buenaventura, for denouncing the detrimental impact of these groups on communities. The Christian NGO Open Doors reported that due to threats from armed groups against civilians across northern Colombia, many Christians were unable to attend church services.

Religious communities, however, reported several acts of vandalism against places of worship, especially those of the Catholic Church. According to media reports, demonstrators painted graffiti on a Catholic church to demonstrate support for decriminalizing abortion. In addition, on March 8, the CEC reported that demonstrators supporting abortion interrupted a religious event titled “40 Days of Life.” On January 8, Martha Sepulveda, a self-described devout Catholic, died by euthanasia, despite the church’s opposition to her decision. 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 an important mediator during peace talks between the government and certain illegal armed groups, including the U.S.-designated terrorist organization ELN. Faith-based and interfaith NGOs continued to promote religious freedom and tolerance through their programs and community engagement.

U.S. embassy officials raised issues of religious freedom, including the negative effect of illegal armed actors on religious practice, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the International Affairs Directorate of the AGO, and the DRA. The Chargé d’Affaires met with the Apostolic Nunciature in July and representatives of the Catholic Church during various travels across the country to discuss the church’s role supporting human rights and peace. On September 28, the embassy hosted a meeting with representatives from the DRA as well as leaders from a wide range of religious groups. During the year, the embassy used social media to recognize the importance of the freedom of religion and belief.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 49.1 million (midyear 2022). According to a 2017 survey by the NGO Latinobarómetro, 73 percent of the population is Roman 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, members of 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. According to Baha'i leaders, there are approximately 60,000 followers; a Buddhist representative estimates there are 9,000 adherents. The Confederation of Jewish Communities in Colombia (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.

Some religious groups are concentrated in specific geographical 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 Bogotá), 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. 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 otherwise 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 funds or receive nonfinancial private donations.

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. 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, and the Federation Evangelical Council of Colombia. The agreement authorizes these groups to engage in activities such as marriages, funeral services, and spiritual assistance in prisons, hospitals, military facilities, and educational institutions. Under the 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 Ministry of Interior began this year, but did not complete, a process to update the 1997 public law to include other religious groups.

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 (\$1,700-\$2,600).

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 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 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

The MOI reported there were 10,081 formally recognized religious organizations in the country, compared with 9,032 in 2021 and 8,214 at the end of 2020. During the year it received 1,095 applications for formal recognition of religious organizations, compared with 723 in 2021; approved 788, compared with 595 in 2021; and deferred or denied 307, compared with 15 in 2021. The MOI stated that the reason it deferred or denied petitions was because the applying entity failed to meet legal requirements or failed to provide missing information during the year. According to the MOI, 99.5 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 recognition of 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 provided support to the 32 geographical departments to continue implementing the National Public Policy of Religious Freedom and Worship adopted in 2018 to provide guarantees to exercise freedom of religion and worship. The policy 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 public measures on religious freedom during the year. These included campaigns to reduce stigmatization of religious communities and improve dialogues between religious groups and government institutions at the national and regional levels.

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. During the year, the DRA offered resources to religious communities through the "Bank of Interreligious Initiatives" to highlight the contributions of religious communities to society to reduce stigmatization. The ministry also undertook research to assess the contributions of religious communities towards the country's economic development. During the year, 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 together 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.

On July 6, then President Duque commemorated the National Day of Religious Freedom and spoke in support of outreach and initiatives highlighting religious freedom. In connection with the observance, the MOI and regional governments held forums and workshops to educate the public on the significance of the holiday and an expanded new public policy to foster interfaith dialogue. Religious freedom and respect for religious groups were included in 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 peace building efforts related to the 2016 Peace Accord, new dialogues with illegal armed groups, and the provision of assistance to migrants displaced from the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela.

In December, the NGO Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) published a report on Indigenous freedom of religion or belief, in which it asserted that the legal framework prevents Indigenous citizens belonging to religious minority groups from enjoying the same rights as the rest of the population. The report stated that the 1998 Constitutional Court decision leaves members of religious minority groups in Indigenous areas without protection for their right to freedom of religion or belief or legal recourse at the national level, should they defy Indigenous traditional authorities' prohibition on the practice of 'non-traditional' religions on Indigenous reserves.

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 the end of the year, it had approved 124 of 209 applications seeking conscientious objector status on religious grounds.

One member of the National Table of the Religious Affairs reported that more than 60 foreign missionaries did not receive renewal of their visas to

continue service in the country. The MFA confirmed that by the end of the year, it had processed 1,587 visa applications for religious missionaries, of which 47 were rejected for not complying with the documentation requirements. The MFA stated that the rejections were not due to religious reasons.

The 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, including those involved in religious activities.

ACTIONS BY FOREIGN FORCES AND NONSTATE ACTORS

The AGO investigated three homicides of religious leaders by nonstate actors in Valle del Cauca and Córdoba. In addition, the AGO investigated 22 cases of threats by illegal armed groups against religious leaders in Boyacá, Cundinamarca, Atlántico, Bogotá, Meta, Norte de Santander, Tolima, Valle del Cauca, Magdalena, and Nariño and one case of displacement of a religious leader in Nariño. According to the CEC, on February 8, illegal armed groups threatened Monsignor Rubén Darío Jaramillo Montoya, bishop of Buenaventura, for his role in denouncing worsening security conditions for local communities.

During the year, leaders of many religious groups continued to report that illegal armed nonstate actors, in particular 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 Christian NGO Open Doors reported that due to threats from illegal armed groups against civilians across northern Colombia, many Christians were unable to attend church services. For example, on Sunday, May 8, more than 2,000 churches cancelled services to keep their congregations safe amid threats from the transnational narco-trafficking criminal organization Clan del Golfo.

One religious leader reported monthly extortion by armed groups in a rural area where a church operated a shelter for displaced persons fleeing conflict. According to the religious leader, the armed groups began the extortion in 2019. The case was not reported to authorities because of a fear of violent retribution by armed groups against religious communities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The MOI reported cases of abuses of religious freedom that involved alleged physical threats to religious leaders. The MOI reported the cases to the police. The MOI also reported that a person was threatened during

the year when he sought to leave an unspecified spiritual group that was not legally recognized.

During the year, religious communities reported to local authorities several acts of vandalism against places of worship, especially those of the Catholic Church. The CEC also reported acts of vandalism against 15 Catholic churches in the departments of Córdoba, Cauca, Antioquia, Tolima, Boyacá, Sucre, Santander, and Bogotá. The reported acts included desecration of religious objects, theft of eucharistic chalices and paintings, and graffiti on temples. The impacted religious communities reported the incidents to police and publicized them on social media.

On September 28, demonstrators threw a Molotov cocktail at the Metropolitan Cathedral of Bogotá and painted graffiti in support of efforts to decriminalize abortion, according to the media reports. Police and the riot control unit (Esmad, by the Spanish acronym) were present but made no arrests. In addition, on March 8, the CEC reported a case of demonstrators in support of abortion policies interrupting a religious event titled "40 Days of Life."

According to media reports, on March 8, a group of demonstrators disrupted a Catholic Mass in Bogotá, verbally protesting the church's positions opposing abortion and same-sex marriage.

According to the *Times of Israel*, presidential candidate Rodolfo Hernández issued an apology in June after audio from a 2016 radio interview surfaced, in which Hernández, mayor of Bucaramanga at the time, said he was the follower of a "great German thinker" named Hitler. In the apology, Hernández clarified that he meant to refer to Albert Einstein.

According to media reports, on January 8, Martha Sepulveda, a self-described devout Catholic, died in Medellín by euthanasia despite opposition to her decision from the Catholic Church and after a lengthy legal battle in 2021.

According to media reports, religious leaders of various beliefs organized in opposition to the efforts of the El Dorado International Airport in Bogotá to close a chapel that the Catholic Church historically had operated in favor of a more inclusive space for religious observances/reflection. The religious leaders said that Catholic chapels should not be closed in airports, Congress, hospitals, cemeteries, and other public spaces. They instead advocated for the creation of a separate all-inclusive religious space, while retaining the existing chapel.

The Baptist Church reported that some members of the community were not allowed to use chapels at cemeteries in Cali to hold funeral services, as the chapels were set aside for the Catholic Church. There were cases, however, in which dialogue between religious leaders of each community

facilitated the use of a chapel for funeral services for Baptist Church members.

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

On May 7, in the midst of an increase in rural violence, the Catholic Church called on the narcotrafficking organization Clan del Golfo to avoid targeting civilian groups and urged dialogue with other armed groups in the country.

On July 10, the Catholic Church expressed its intention to facilitate negotiations between the Petro government and the ELN. On October 6, after the resumption of peace negotiations with the ELN, Catholic Church leadership underscored the need for concrete cessation of attacks against civilians. On December 11, the Catholic Church confirmed it would serve as a "permanent accompanier" to the negotiations, which remained ongoing at the end of the year.

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

According to CSW's report on Indigenous freedom of religion or belief, Indigenous individuals of religious minority groups experienced varying forms of discrimination by Indigenous community members and leaders. In several cases, Indigenous Protestant Christians faced threats, harassment, bullying, arbitrary detention, and torture from their fellow Indigenous community based on their religious beliefs, driving them to flee their communities. In the Emberá-Wounaan Indigenous communities in the Pizarro and Litoral de San Juan municipalities in the Chocó Department, Indigenous authorities prohibited the practice of Christianity and stated that Protestant Christians could be punished with forced community work.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials discussed the negative impact of illegal armed groups on 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.

Using messages on social media, the embassy highlighted U.S. collaboration with the government and civil society to promote respect for religious pluralism and diversity of belief and to condemn antisemitism

and highlight local events advocating religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy officials met virtually with representatives from a wide range of religious groups, including Catholics, evangelical Protestants, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Presbyterians, the CJCC, Greek Orthodox, the Bogotá Muslim community, representatives from a coalition of Indigenous religious groups, and from other faith-based NGOs, including the Colombian Confederation of Religious Freedom, Conscience and Worship.

On September 28, embassy officials hosted an in-person meeting with representatives from the DRA as well as with leaders from religious groups, including the Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist, Jewish, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Greek Orthodox, Church of Jesus Christ, and Bogotá Muslim communities. During the meeting, embassy officials reiterated the U.S. commitment to supporting religious freedom and discussed ways to address challenges and threats facing religious communities.

Throughout the year, embassy officials discussed with members of the MOI's DRA and MFA's Human Rights Directorate, the MOD's Human Rights Directorate, and the AGO, the government's policies on religious freedom, conscientious objection to military service, antisemitism, and the role of religious NGOs in combating religious intolerance and support for the 2016 peace accord. The Chargé met with the Apostolic Nunciature in July and with representatives of the Catholic Church during various travels across the country to discuss the church's role supporting human rights. On October 18, the Chargé met with the Episcopal Conference in Colombia to discuss the role of Catholic Church in the peace process and defense of human rights.

During the year, the embassy used social media to recognize the importance of the freedom of religion and belief. On July 29, the Chargé d'Affaires tweeted in the embassy's social media that he discussed the important role of the Catholic Church and shared reflections on the state of human rights and peace in the country with the Apostolic Nuncio. On October 27, the embassy tweeted its support for strengthening religious freedom in the country, echoing a statement by the U.S. Secretary of State on International Religious Freedom Day.

ecoi.net description:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2022)

Country:

Colombia

Source:

[USDOS – US Department of State](#) (Author)

Original link:
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/colombia/>

Document type:
Periodical Report

Language:
English

Published:
15 May 2023

Available on ecoi.net since:
16 May 2023

Document ID:
2091870

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Country of Origin and	T +43 1 589 00 583	F.A.Q.
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Documentation	info@ecoi.net	
(ACCORD)		

ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

