

HONDURAS 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions. The government provides official recognition only to the Roman Catholic Church, classifying other religious groups as religious associations with fewer rights and privileges than the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church and others criticized the state's nonrecognition of religious weddings performed without an attendant civil marriage certificate. Non-Catholic religious communities criticized the lack of equal recognition and treatment for all churches, including the government's imposition of an income tax on the salaries of non-Catholic clergy and import taxes on religious materials received from abroad.

Seventh-day Adventists said educational institutions sometimes failed to respect their observance of the Sabbath on Saturdays. Jehovah's Witnesses said that some educational institutions required them to participate in patriotic activities contrary to their faith and some government medical facilities refused to treat them because they would not accept blood transfusions. Some Muslims reported being denied the right to wear the hijab in both government and private sector offices. The government worked with religious organizations to address their concerns regarding registration of churches and to facilitate missionaries' residency status.

Public comments by some activists disparaged some religious groups and their beliefs and practices. There was evidence of a lack of tolerance toward religious groups by some sectors of society, particularly on issues in the public sphere, such as alleged political activism and close ties to the government by some religious groups. Incidents of anti-Semitic statements on the internet arose in the context of discussions about violence between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East. Some Muslims reported being denied the right to pray during work hours. Some civil society activists protested the selection of an evangelical leader as a member of the nominating board for candidates seeking appointment to the Supreme Court.

U.S. embassy officials maintained a dialogue with religious leaders and organizations, which included discussions regarding differential treatment of religious groups. One important topic was the absence of a religious organization registration law that treated religious groups differently than nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Section I. Religious Demography

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The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.7 million (July 2015 estimate). The principal religious groups are Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants. The Roman Catholic Church states it has approximately 6.85 million adherents, or 79 percent of the population. A 2014 survey by a local marketing research and public opinion company, however, reported that 45 percent of respondents self-identified as evangelical Protestants, 41 percent as Roman Catholics, and 11 percent as unaffiliated with any religious organization. Other prominent religious groups with their stated number of adherents include the Seventh-day Adventist Church (230,000); The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons, 165,000 adherents); Jehovah's Witnesses (22,000); and a variety of Anabaptist/Mennonite groups (18,000), Episcopalians, and Lutherans. The most prominent evangelical churches include the Church of God, the Assemblies of God, the Abundant Life Church, the Living Love Church, the International Christian Center, and various Great Commission churches. A growing number of evangelical churches have no denominational affiliation. The Moravian Church has a broad presence in the La Mosquitia region in the eastern part of the country. There is one Orthodox Christian church in San Pedro Sula, which primarily serves persons of Arab descent. Some indigenous groups and Afro-Hondurans practice African and Amerindian faiths or incorporate elements of Christianity, African, and Amerindian religions into their religious practices and beliefs. Representatives of the respective communities reported there are approximately 1,500 Muslims and a few hundred Jews.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions as long as that exercise does not contravene other laws or public order. Religious leaders are prohibited from holding public office or making political statements.

By law, only the legislature has the authority to confer status as a legally recognized church. The law distinguishes between recognized churches, religious organizations registered as NGOs, and nonregistered religious organizations. The constitution authorizes the executive branch to grant juridical personality to NGOs, including religious associations, which is required in order to register with the government. The government does not require religious groups to register; however, registered groups may apply to the Ministry of Finance to receive

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benefits, such as tax exemptions and customs duty waivers. To register, organizations must meet the requirements for an NGO and have a board of directors. The government does not distinguish between religious and nonreligious NGOs. Associations seeking juridical personality must submit an application to the Secretariat of State for Human Rights, Justice, Governance, and Decentralization describing their internal organization, bylaws, and goals. The Office of the Solicitor General must review all applications from religious groups and render a constitutional opinion. Approved organizations must submit annual financial and activity reports to the government.

The constitution states public education shall be secular and allows the establishment of private schools. Parents have the right to choose the education their children receive, including religious education.

Foreign religious workers can request residency for up to five years. Some churches, including the Seventh-day Adventists and the Mormons, have migration facilitation agreements with the Secretary of Governance and Justice which specifies required documentation to process residency permits for religious workers from those churches. Churches that do not have such an agreement must provide proof of employment with the respective church and proof of income. To renew their residence permits, religious workers must submit proof of continued employment with the sponsoring church at least 30 days before their residency expires. The law prohibits the immigration of foreign missionaries who practice religions claiming to use witchcraft or satanic rituals, and allows the deportation of foreigners who practice witchcraft or “religious fraud.” According to the country’s immigration law, individuals who “fraudulently exercise their [religious] profession or office, or commit fraud against the health or religious beliefs of citizens of the country, or the national patrimony,” can also be fined or face other legal consequences.

The criminal code protects clergy who are authorized to operate in the country from being forced to testify about privileged information obtained in confidence during a religious confession. Vicars, bishops, and archbishops of the Roman Catholic Church and comparably ranked individuals from other churches that are legally recognized are not required to appear in court if subpoenaed. They are still required, however, to make a statement at a location of their choosing.

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Religious officials who perform religious marriages without civil marriage licenses face fines of 50,000-100,000 lempiras (\$2,242 - \$4,484) and legal bans on practicing their religious offices from four to six years.

The government is a party to the Ibero-American Convention on Young People's Rights, which recognizes the right to conscientious objection to obligatory military service.

Government Practices

The government continued to identify the Catholic Church as the only legally recognized church, and continued to classify other religious groups as religious associations. Other religious groups criticized the government's failure to recognize them as churches and their inability to receive attendant benefits such as tax exemptions for clergy salaries and imported religious materials. Religious groups criticized the state's failure to recognize religious marriages conducted without a civil license.

Religious organizations criticized the application of one uniform set of registration rules to all nonprofit organizations, and said that they should be recognized as religious groups rather than NGOs. The government's registration office for civil organizations published separate, but apparently identical guidelines for churches. The government continued to work with some religious organizations to address concerns regarding registration. Religious organizations strongly criticized the government's requirement that all such organizations have a board of directors registered by the government and file annual financial and activity reports. Small or nondenominational groups stated these requirements were particularly difficult to meet.

Some Muslims reported that Muslim women were not permitted to wear the hijab while working as government employees in public healthcare facilities, the offices of the national healthcare system, or in judicial facilities. Private female lawyers were reportedly allowed to wear the hijab in court.

Despite a letter issued by the Secretary of Education in 2014 excusing members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church from attending "Civic Saturdays," church members reported that some teachers and principals still expected Saturday attendance in public and private schools. Church leaders also stated that public universities had not responded positively to, or had rejected entirely, complaints

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filed by church members in 2014 regarding the failure to provide alternatives to Saturday classes for Adventist students. An appeal to the National Teachers University was pending at year's end. Church leaders attempted to file a complaint in October at the office of the National Human Rights Commissioner (CONADEH), but were turned away and told that the issue was not under CONADEH's purview.

A rule drafted in 2010 requiring Jehovah's Witnesses to sing the national anthem, salute the national flag, and participate in other patriotic events remained in the Secretariat of Education school guidelines, despite a 2014 ruling from the secretariat's Legal Director that the rule was not enforceable. One private school student transferred schools after being required to participate in patriotic events. Universities permitted students to abstain from patriotic activities after presenting a written statement of their affiliation with the Jehovah's Witnesses. Some public hospitals refused to treat Jehovah's Witnesses who refused blood transfusions.

Although religious leaders are prohibited from holding political office, some Protestant pastors, however, reportedly held elected office in congress, including one who is designated as the third-in-line in the constitutional presidential succession.

The government required foreign missionaries to obtain entry and residence permits. A local institution or individual was required to sponsor a missionary's application for residency, which was submitted to immigration authorities. The government had agreements with members of the Evangelical Fellowship of Honduras (CEH), the Mormons, and the Seventh-day Adventists, among others, to facilitate entry and residence permits for their missionaries. The government approved tax exemptions for emergency aid provided by certain religious organizations, including the Mormons, the Seventh-day Adventists, and some evangelical organizations. Since 2010, the Jehovah's Witnesses have been unable to receive tax exemptions for imported religious materials.

The armed forces had an official Catholic patron saint. Military base commanders each selected Catholic or Protestant chaplains. Both prominent Catholics and evangelical Protestants served on governmental commissions. The government routinely invited Catholic and evangelical leaders to lead prayers at government events. The president of the CEH served on the nominating board charged with selecting candidates for appointment by congress to the supreme court.

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Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Public comments by some activists disparaged some religious groups and their beliefs and practices. On a prominent news agency website commenting on an article about regulating noise levels of evangelical congregations, for example, one commentator said that “evangelicals are hypocrites, always talking about God and sin, but are the first to commit all sorts of outrages against the people.”

There was strong criticism from some sectors of society of some evangelical Protestant groups and, to a lesser degree, the Catholic Church, for alleged political activism and close ties to the government. Religious groups stated that some media reported incorrect and inflammatory information about the activities of religious leaders. In one example, a prominent media organization reported claims by an indigenous rights activist that the country’s only Catholic cardinal had promoted hatred, discrimination, and racism by discouraging indigenous Roman Catholics from joining her NGO or listening to radio stations sympathetic to the NGO’s activities. A representative of the Catholic Church denied these allegations and said the cardinal was not in the country at the time of his alleged remarks.

Incidents of anti-Semitic statements on the internet arose in the context of discussions about violence between Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East. Members of the Jewish community reported they continued to hear pejorative statements about Jews in general conversation.

Some Muslim women reported that they were denied the right to wear the hijab in private sector offices, or were asked to remove it when passing through bank security. Some Muslims reported being denied the right to pray during work hours.

Some civil society activists protested the selection of a member of the CEH as a representative to the nominating board for candidates seeking appointment to the supreme court. Religious organizations responded that they were participating in the process as was their right as NGOs.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials maintained a dialogue with religious leaders and organizations, which included discussions of differential treatment of religious

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groups. One important topic was the absence of a religious organization registration law that treated religious groups differently than NGOs.