

BOLIVIA 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution stipulates the state is independent of religion and provides for “freedom of thought, spirituality, religion, and worship, expressed individually or collectively, in public and in private.” The constitution and other laws accord educational institutions the right to teach religion, including indigenous spiritual belief classes. Because of COVID-19 restrictions, there were administrative delays reported in implementing and enforcing the 2019 Law of Religious Freedom, Religious Organizations and Spiritual Beliefs, which created a clear distinction between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious organizations. Evangelical Protestant community representatives again reported several smaller religious communities with “house churches” preferred not to register their organizations because they did not want to provide the government access to private internal information.

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

In October, embassy representatives met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) officials to discuss the challenges related to COVID-19 restrictions and their impact on religious freedom and the status of implementation of the religious freedom law. Embassy staff regularly met with religious leaders to underscore the importance of religious freedom. The *Charge d’Affaires* hosted a virtual interfaith meeting with religious leaders in October, including representatives from Roman Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and Jewish groups, to engage them in interfaith dialogue, discuss the impact of COVID-19 in their communities, and hear their views on the current state of religious freedom. Embassy officials met on other occasions with representatives from Muslim, evangelical Protestant, and Catholic groups to discuss the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on their congregations and their relationships with the interim government under the leadership of President Jeanine Anez, which was in power until November when newly elected President Luis Arce took office.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.6 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to U.S. government figures, 77 percent of the population identifies as Catholic and 16 percent as Protestant, including evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal groups. According to the local leader of The Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), approximately 300,000 followers reside in the country; the Church of Jesus Christ's central website estimates more than 200,000 followers. Approximately five percent of the population identifies with smaller religious groups, and five percent self-identify as nonbelievers. There are approximately 1,500 Muslims and 450 Jews, according to leaders of the respective faiths and news reports. Many indigenous communities, concentrated in rural areas, practice a mix of Catholic and indigenous spiritual traditions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, the state respects and provides for “freedom of thought, spirituality, religion and worship,” expressed individually or collectively, in public and in private. The constitution stipulates the state is independent of all religion.

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, including access to educational institutions, health services, and employment, and protects the right of access to public sport and recreational activities without regard to religion.

The Freedom of Religion, Religious Organizations, and Spiritual Organizations Law creates a clear distinction between NGOs and religious organizations. Under the law, religious organizations are constituted to practice, profess, and teach their specific faith or religion, while NGOs have no such faith-based ties. The religious freedom law requires all religious or spiritual organizations to inform the government of all financial, legal, social, and religious activities. The law regulates religious or spiritual organizations' finances and labor practices by requiring their use of funds exclusively to achieve the organization's objectives, banning the distribution of money among members, subjecting all employees to national labor laws, requiring the organizations to register with the MFA, and compelling them to pay taxes. Pursuant to a concordat with the Holy See, the Catholic Church is exempt from registration.

Religious organizations must submit 14 documentary requirements to register with the government. These include notarized legal documents, including statutes, internal regulations and procedures; rental agreement documents, utility invoices for the place(s) of worship, and a site map; detailed information on board members and legal representatives, including criminal background checks; an INTERPOL

certificate for foreigners; proof of fiscal solvency; organization chart, with names, addresses, identification card numbers, and photographs; a full list of members and identifying information; details on activities and services provided by the organization, including the location of the services; and information on their financing source(s), domestic and/or foreign.

The requirements for classification as a spiritual organization or religious organization vary slightly, but the government requires essentially the same type of information from both spiritual and religious entities. The constitution defines a spiritual organization as a group of natural, national, and/or foreign persons who organize themselves to carry out practices that develop their spirituality according to their ancestral worldview. Most spiritual organizations are indigenous in their origins. The constitution defines a religious organization as a group of natural, national, and/or foreign persons who organize themselves with the purpose of carrying out practices of worship and/or belief around a Supreme Being in order to develop their spirituality and religiosity, and whose purpose does not pursue profit.

The government may revoke a spiritual or religious organization's operating license if the organization does not produce an annual report of activities for more than two consecutive years; does not comply with its stated objectives; carries out activities different from those established in its statutes; or carries out activities contrary to the country's constitution, laws, morality, or "good customs." A religious or spiritual organization may also lose its operating license if it does not comply with the deadline for renewing the license.

A 2017 regulation requires religious and spiritual groups to reregister their operating licenses to ensure all documents list the official name of the country as "Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia." Reregistration also requires any amendments to organizations' bylaws to conform to all new national laws. Religious and spiritual groups were required to comply with these new registration requirements by the end of 2019.

The fees to obtain an operating license differ between "Religious Organizations" and "Spiritual Organizations," with costs of 6,780 bolivianos (\$1,000) and 4,068 bolivianos (\$600), respectively.

The government reserves the right to revoke an organization's operating permit for noncompliance with the registration requirements. The government may not deny legal recognition to any organization based on its articles of faith.

The constitution and other laws provide educational institutions the option to teach religion classes, including indigenous spiritual belief classes, with the stated aim of encouraging mutual respect among religious communities. While religion classes are optional, schools must teach ethics with curriculum materials that promote religious tolerance. The government does not restrict religious teaching in public or private schools, and it does not restrict a student from attending private, religiously affiliated schools. The law also requires all schools to accept students regardless of their religious affiliation.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Political and Civil Rights.

Government Practices

Despite the length of time since the passage of the religious freedom law in 2019, religious leaders and sources in the MFA reported the interim government had not completely implemented or enforced the law, particularly aspects pertaining to the registration requirement, due to the political fluidity in the country and prolonged restrictions related to COVID-19.

Members of the evangelical Protestant community continued to say several smaller religious communities formed congregations that held services at unofficial worship locations and conducted other activities without registering. These smaller communities continued to refuse to register their organizations because, according to sources, they preferred not to provide the government with access to internal information. Sources stated these unregistered groups still could neither own property nor hold bank accounts in their organization's name; instead, money for a group was generally held in a bank account controlled by the leader's family. They said the administration of interim President Anez, however, did not interfere with these organizations despite their refusal to comply with the law; they stated the government was likely too occupied with confronting COVID-19 and political turmoil in the country to enforce the registration law.

According to the MFA's Office of Religion and Nongovernmental Organizations, there were approximately 440 registered groups listed under the requirements of the religious freedom law. According to the MFA, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and institutional uncertainty during the period the interim government was in office significantly reduced the number of religious registrations, and the number of registered groups during the year remained approximately the same as in 2019. According to religious leaders, nearly all known religious or spiritual organizations that wished to register with the government had complied with the

requirements. Religious groups said the registration process generally took four to six months to complete. In October, MFA officials stated they were working on a system to digitize the registration process to reduce the timeline to one to two months, but the government did not implement the new system by year's end.

Some leaders of minority religious groups, including Jewish and Protestant, expressed hope the new administration and MFA leadership would organize interfaith meetings to obtain insights from minority faith-based communities and to hear their concerns.

On April 26, via a short video projected in front of the presidential residence in La Paz, interim President Anez called for a day of fasting and prayer to defeat the COVID-19 pandemic and recited a quote from the Book of Isaiah to call for divine help. Although Anez had previously recorded several similar religion-themed videos and posted them on her social media accounts, this marked the first time she set a specific day to hold religious devotions in homes to find unity to confront the pandemic. Several private news articles criticized the event and cited article 4 of the constitution, which established the state as independent of any religion.

During Christian Holy Week, from April 5-12, the interim government launched four helicopter "blessing flights" to commemorate the religious holidays while the population was required to stay at home due to COVID-19 quarantine. The first flight took place on April 9 in Cochabamba, when a priest flew in an army helicopter and scattered holy water over dozens of neighborhoods. On April 15, interim President Anez posted photographs on social media of her waving goodbye to the presidential helicopter as it took off carrying a priest who blessed neighborhoods in El Alto and La Paz. According to the newspaper *Opinion*, the idea gained the support of then Minister of Defense Luis Fernando Lopez Julio and then Minister of Labor Oscar Mercado Cespedes, who directed the logistics of the flights. Local media sources cited criticism from defense experts of the use of official aircraft for religious activities, and other experts said the helicopters should have been reserved for medical deliveries or search and rescue operations in remote areas. Some local religious organizations applauded the operation; from its Facebook page, the Evangelical Church Agua Viva de la Roca in Tarija urged its parishioners to go to their patios or terraces during the published flyover times with Bolivian or Tarija flags to receive the helicopter blessing and pray together.

During a September 20 appearance on the television program "One Decides 2020," presidential candidate Luis Fernando Camacho said, "God is going to rule this country," adding, "God entered the [presidential] palace to change Bolivia" in

November 2019, and that a divine miracle occurred when former President Evo Morales resigned just 40 minutes after Camacho placed a Bible inside the presidential palace during the 2019 post-election unrest.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In October, embassy representatives met with MFA officials to discuss the challenges related to COVID-19 restrictions and their impact on religious freedom and the implementation of the new religious freedom law.

Embassy representatives routinely engaged religious leaders to underscore the importance of tolerance and religious freedom. In October, the Charge d'Affaires hosted virtual interfaith meetings with religious leaders from the evangelical Protestant, Muslim, Catholic, and Jewish communities to discuss religious freedom issues, including the religious freedom law, and to encourage religious leaders to engage in interfaith dialogue. In September and October, embassy officials organized separate meetings with leaders of evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim groups to discuss the impact of the implementation of the religious freedom law, the impact of COVID-19 on their communities and their relationships with the interim government under the leadership of President Jeanine Anez, and ways that religious leaders could serve as trusted intermediaries during the period of political instability.