

HONDURAS 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions. Religious organizations may register as legal entities classified as religious associations and thereby acquire tax-exempt status and other government benefits. Seventh-day Adventists continued to state some public educational institutions did not respect their religious observance on Saturdays because Saturdays were part of the official work week. On October 15, the Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum (FIH) – an interfaith nongovernmental organization (NGO) – reported government discrimination in residency applications for foreign missionaries. It stated the government did not approve or respond to applications of residency extensions for certain religious groups, while favoring others. According to Muslim leaders, members of their community no longer encountered unnecessary bureaucratic and discriminatory barriers when requesting basic governmental services or permits, an improvement from previous years. The FIH reported the government granted safe-conduct permits for movement during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown from March to October only to religious organizations covered under the Evangelical Fellowship of Honduras (CEH). FIH representatives said many organizations not belonging to the CEH were limited in their social work because the government provided biosecurity equipment to only 10 FIH member organizations.

Muslim leaders reported one incident where individuals who self-identified as evangelical Protestants appeared at an Islamic community outreach event, making offensive remarks regarding their community. Representatives of the Muslim community said they conducted community events to promote religious freedom and tolerance, including discussion of issues such as common misconceptions of the tenets of Islam. The FIH also conducted community events to promote religious freedom and tolerance. The CEH reported its members received threatening messages from unknown individuals that they believed were in response to the CEH's support of a government proposal to provide financial assistance to elderly evangelical Protestant pastors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Charge d'Affaires underscored with the Minister of Human Rights the importance of religious freedom as a fundamental right. U.S. embassy officials met with officials of the Secretariat of Human Rights, the Secretariat of Foreign Relations, and the autonomous National Commission of Human Rights (CONADEH) to discuss issues of religious freedom, including the importance of

respect for minority religious groups and for equal treatment under the law for all religious groups. On November 25, the Charge d’Affaires met with Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga, who described the Church’s disaster relief efforts in the aftermath of Hurricanes Eta and Iota. On October 28, the Charge d’Affaires hosted an interfaith roundtable to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. Topics included religious freedom in schools, challenges some faith groups faced in addressing registration issues, societal violence, poverty reduction, and how the COVID-19 pandemic affected religious groups. Embassy officials continued to engage with religious leaders and other members of a wide range of religious communities regarding societal violence and their concerns about the government’s dealings with religious groups in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.2 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to a CID Gallup poll released in May, 34 percent of the population identifies as Roman Catholic and 48 percent as evangelical Protestant. According to a 2017-18 Digital Christian Observatory survey, 92 percent of the population is affiliated with a religious organization, with 45 percent identifying as Roman Catholic and 40 percent as Protestant, including evangelical Protestant groups.

Other religious groups, each representing less than 5 percent of the population, include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Episcopalians, Lutherans, the Antiochian Orthodox Apostolic Catholic Church, Muslims, Jews, Baha’is, the Moravian Church, and several Anabaptist and Mennonite groups. Evangelical Protestant churches include the Church of God, Assemblies of God, Abundant Life Church, Living Love Church, International Christian Center, and various Great Commission churches. Several evangelical Protestant churches have no denominational affiliation. The Moravian Church has a broad presence in the La Mosquitia Region in the eastern part of the country. Some indigenous groups and Afro-Hondurans practice African and Amerindian faiths or incorporate elements of Christianity, African, and Amerindian religions into syncretistic religious practices and beliefs.

According to a representative of the Seventh-day Adventist Association, there are 79,877 members. The Jehovah’s Witnesses community states there are 23,016 members. The Muslim community states it has 2,695 members, mostly Sunni; approximately 90 percent are converts. The Antioquia Orthodox Apostolic

Catholic community has approximately 5,000 members. The Baha'i community counts 1,009 members. The Jewish community estimates it has 275 members.

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. The constitution prohibits religious leaders from holding public office or making political statements. Religious organizations may register as legal entities classified as religious associations. Organizations seeking status as a legal entity must apply to the Secretariat of Governance, Justice, and Decentralization and provide information on their internal organization, bylaws, and goals. Approved organizations must submit annual financial and activity reports to the government to remain registered. They may apply to the Ministry of Finance to receive benefits, such as tax exemptions and customs duty waivers. Unregistered religious organizations do not receive tax-exempt status.

The official NGO registry office – the Directorate of Regulation, Registration, and Monitoring of Civil Associations (DRRSAC) – is located within the Secretariat of Governance, Justice, and Decentralization.

The constitution states public education is secular and allows for the establishment of private schools, including schools run by religious organizations. Public schools do not teach religion; however, private schools may include religion as part of the curriculum. Various religious organizations, including the Roman Catholic Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and evangelical Protestant churches, run schools. Parents have the right to choose the kind of education their children receive, including religious education. The government dictates a minimum standardized curriculum for all schools. Some private religiously-affiliated schools require participation in religious events to graduate.

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, including for religious reasons.

The government requires foreign missionaries to obtain entry and residence permits and mandates that a local institution or individual must sponsor a missionary's application for residency and submit it to immigration authorities.

The government has agreements with the CEH, the Church of Jesus Christ, and Seventh-day Adventists, among others, to facilitate entry and residence permits for their missionaries. Groups with which the government does not have written agreements are required to provide proof of employment and income for their missionaries.

Foreign religious workers may request residency for up to five years. To renew their residence permits, religious workers must submit proof of continued employment with the sponsoring religious group at least 30 days before their residency expires. According to the 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,” may be fined or face other legal consequences.

The criminal code protects clergy authorized to operate in the country from being required by the court or the Attorney General’s Office to testify regarding privileged information obtained in confidence during a religious confession. The law does not require vicars, bishops, and archbishops of the Roman Catholic Church and comparably ranked individuals from other legally recognized religious groups to appear in court if subpoenaed. They are required, however, to make a statement at a location of their choosing.

The official regulations for the penal system state that penitentiaries must guarantee the free exercise of religion without preference for one specific religion, as long as the kind of worship is not against the law or public order. Prisoners have access to religious counseling from leaders of their faith.

While the government authorizes clergy from all religious groups to conduct marriage ceremonies, it legally recognizes only civil marriages conducted with a lawyer authorized to perform marriage ceremonies.

The official work week is Monday to Saturday, with no exceptions for religious groups that celebrate Friday or Saturday as their Sabbath.

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

Government Practices

Representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church continued to express concerns that some schools and other private and public institutions did not grant

them leave to observe their Saturday Sabbath because Saturdays were part of the official work week. They cited specifically the Francisco Morazan National Pedagogical University and the Catholic University of San Pedro Sula. They noted the Supreme Court had ruled favorably in 2019 on a constitutional challenge that Adventist students filed in 2015 seeking alternatives to taking classes or exams on Saturdays, but these institutions did not uphold that ruling, nor did the government enforce it. Reportedly, students at both universities requested the institutions comply with the Supreme Court's ruling. The Francisco Morazan University secretariat denied the request; the students appealed, and the appeal remained pending at year's end. One student at the Catholic University submitted a formal petition to the university to comply with the court, but officials denied the petition. Other students said they decided not to pursue further recourse out of fear of additional discrimination and retaliation from their professors.

Some religious organizations, including the interfaith NGO FIH, said the government continued to give preference to religious groups belonging to the evangelical Protestant umbrella organization CEH. On October 15, the FIH reported government discrimination in residency applications for missionaries, noting the government did not approve or respond to applications of residency extensions for certain religious groups, while favoring applications from the CEH.

At year's end, the DRRSAC registered 66 religious associations out of a total of 86 applications, compared with 120 registered in 2019. According to the DRRSAC, it did not deny any registration requests by religious associations during the year, but some applications continued to be under review through year's end.

According to Muslim leaders, members of their community no longer encountered unnecessary bureaucratic and discriminatory barriers when requesting basic governmental services or permits, an improvement from previous years.

In October, the FIH reported the government granted safe-conduct permits for movement during the COVID-19 pandemic only to religious groups covered under the CEH, which represents 388 organizations. FIH representatives said many organizations not belonging to the CEH were limited in their social work because the government provided biosecurity equipment to only 10 FIH member organizations.

A representative of the Catholic Church said Catholic priests were not allowed to enter prisons during the pandemic to give COVID-19-related educational instruction or spiritual counseling. These prohibitions were extended to all

religious groups and visitors. Prison authorities said visits, except for emergency situations, were not allowed because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslim leaders reported one incident in which individuals who identified as evangelical Protestants appeared at an Islamic community outreach event in February, disrupting the event and making offensive remarks and disparaging comments about Muslims, such as “go back to your country.” Muslim leaders said the evangelical Protestants made threats, forcefully removed hijabs from women, and destroyed religious materials. According to the Muslim leaders, they did not file a complaint.

While Muslim community representatives said they continued to receive a few derogatory messages on social media, including “go back to your country,” the representatives emphasized they received far more positive and supportive comments than negative messages.

The CEH reported its members received threatening messages from unknown individuals seeking to discredit the organization because of its support of a government proposal to provide financial assistance to elderly evangelical Protestant pastors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Seventh-day Adventists reported the continued refusal of certain private institutions, including places of employment and schools, to permit them to observe Saturday as their Sabbath.

Representatives of the FIH and the Muslim community each reported conducting community events and outreach to promote religious freedom and tolerance. The FIH, whose members included 94 religious and human rights entities, said it conducted five in-person meetings in January and October, and seven virtual meetings from May through September, as well as 12 additional media appearances. The Muslim community reported it held two in-person outreach events in February and March and two virtual meetings in June and August with other faith groups to deepen interfaith understanding; the events included discussions on common misconceptions about the tenets of Islam.

Cardinal Maradiaga said the Catholic Church provided relief efforts in the aftermath of the two hurricanes, including providing food and other essential items to individuals affected by the hurricanes, regardless of religious affiliation.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d’Affaires underscored with the Minister of Human Rights the importance of religious freedom as a fundamental right. Embassy officials met with officials of the Secretariat of Human Rights, the Secretariat of Foreign Relations, and CONADEH to discuss issues of religious freedom, including the importance of respect for minority religious groups and for equal treatment under the law for all religious groups.

Embassy officials continued discussions with religious leaders and members of religious communities, including Roman Catholics, CEH, FIH, Orthodox Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, and Muslims, regarding societal violence, poverty, and the COVID-19 pandemic. On November 25, the Charge d’Affaires met with Cardinal Maradiaga to discuss the Roman Catholic Church’s disaster relief efforts in the aftermath of the two hurricanes and the impact of the pandemic.

On October 28, the Charge d’Affaires hosted an interfaith roundtable with religious leaders from the Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Seventh-day Adventist, Muslim, and Baha’i communities to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. Participants also discussed the Adventists’ difficulties with schools and other private and public institutions that did not grant leave to Adventist students or employees to observe Saturday as their Sabbath and bureaucratic challenges other groups faced, such as cumbersome registration processes. In addition, participants exchanged ideas on societal violence, poverty reduction, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on religious groups.