

MEXICO 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides all persons the right to religious freedom, including the right to engage in religious ceremonies and acts of worship. The constitution declares the country a secular state. Under the constitution, indigenous communities enjoy a protected legal structure, allowing them some measure of self-governance and to practice their own particular “uses and customs.” The General Directorate for Religious Affairs (DGAR) within the Secretariat of the Interior (SEGOB) continued to work with state and local officials on criminal investigations involving religious groups. During the year, DGAR investigated four cases related to religious freedom at the federal level, compared with seven in 2019. The cases were in the states of Morelos, Chiapas, and Guerrero and mostly involved religious minorities. Government officials and leaders within the Catholic Church continued to state the killings and attacks on Catholic priests and evangelical Protestant pastors reflected high levels of generalized violence throughout the country and not attacks based on religion. According to media reports, in May, an indigenous community in the state of Chiapas expelled six evangelical Protestant families. Local community authorities arrested and jailed the families for not practicing Catholicism, according to the families. In October, media reported that local community leaders drove out 33 evangelical Protestants from a neighborhood of San Cristobal de las Casas, in the state of Chiapas, because they did not adhere to the community’s traditional faith. In July, the Supreme Court of Justice (SCJN) issued a ruling guaranteeing reintegration and protection for a group of indigenous Jehovah’s Witnesses in Tuxpan de Bolanos, Jalisco. According to DGAR, it did not register any new religious associations during the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Because religious leaders are often involved in politics and social activism and are thus more vulnerable to generalized violence, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. There were two reported killings of evangelical Protestant pastors, and attacks and abductions of priests and pastors continued. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reported unidentified individuals killed two religious leaders and kidnapped three others. The Catholic Multimedia Center (CMC) identified the country as the most violent country for priests in Latin America for the 12th year in a row, stating more than two dozen priests were killed over the past decade and emphasizing the ranking reflected the high levels of generalized violence in the country. Some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to say criminal groups singled out Catholic priests

and other religious leaders for their denunciation of criminal activities and because communities viewed them as moral authority figures. According to media, in March, demonstrators in several marches organized for International Women's Day vandalized church buildings, public structures, and businesses.

Embassy and consulate representatives met regularly with government officials responsible for religious and indigenous affairs at both the federal and state levels. Embassy and consulate human rights officers regularly and repeatedly raised religious freedom and freedom of expression issues with foreign affairs and interior secretariat officials. The Ambassador and a senior embassy official met with religious and civil society leaders during travel throughout the country to highlight the importance of religious freedom and tolerance and to reinforce the U.S. government's commitment to these issues. In January, the Ambassador visited Colegio Israelita and gave brief remarks at its Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony. The Ambassador stressed the United States would continue to defend human rights as well as combat anti-Semitism or any other form of hatred. Embassy representatives met with members of religious groups and religiously affiliated NGOs, including the Central Jewish Committee, CMC, and CSW, to discuss the safety of religious workers focusing on humanitarian issues and expressed support for religious tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 128.6 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to the Mexican government's 2020 census, the total population is approximately 126 million. According to the 2020 census, approximately 78 percent of the population identifies as Catholic (compared with 83 percent in 2010); 11 percent as Protestant/Christian Evangelical; and 0.2 percent as other religions, including Judaism, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and Islam. More than 2.5 percent of the population report practicing a religion not otherwise specified (compared with more than 2 percent in 2010) and nearly 8.1 percent report not practicing any religion (compared with 5 percent in 2010). Some indigenous persons adhere to syncretic religions drawing from indigenous beliefs.

Official statistics based on self-identification during the 2010 census, the most recent available for detailed estimates on religious affiliations, sometimes differ from the membership figures stated by religious groups. Approximately 315,000 individuals identify themselves as members of the Church of Jesus Christ. Church of Jesus Christ officials, however, state their membership is approximately 1.5

million. There are large Protestant communities in the southern states of Chiapas and Tabasco. In Chiapas, evangelical Protestant leaders state nearly half of the state's 2.4 million inhabitants are members of evangelical groups and other Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists; however, fewer than 5 percent of 2010 census respondents in Chiapas self-identify as evangelical Protestant. There are also small numbers of followers of Luz del Mundo (LLDM), the Old Catholic Church (Veterocatolica), and the Church of Scientology, as well as Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Baha'is, and Buddhists. The 2010 census lists 5,346 Buddhists. According to media reports, there are 1.5 million followers of LLDM. According to a 2015 Autonomous University of Ciudad Juarez report, there are 50,000 Methodists and 30,000 Anglicans in the country. According to the Baha'i Faith Facebook page, there are 12,000 Baha'is, with hundreds coming from small indigenous communities.

An estimated half of the country's approximately 100,000 Mennonites are concentrated in the state of Chihuahua. According to the 2020 census, the Jewish community totals approximately 58,800 persons, with the vast majority living in Mexico City and the state of Mexico. According to the 2020 census, the Muslim community numbers 7,982 persons. According to SEGOB, nearly half of the country's Muslims are concentrated in Mexico City and the state of Mexico. There is also an Ahmadi Muslim population of several hundred living in the state of Chiapas, most of whom are converts of ethnic Tzotzil Maya origin.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states all persons have the right to follow or adopt the religion of their choosing, or not to follow a religion. This freedom includes the right to participate individually or collectively, both in public and in private, in ceremonies, devotions, and acts of worship if they do not constitute an offense otherwise prohibited by law. Article 40 of the constitution declares the country a secular state. Secularism is mentioned in three other articles, including one dedicated to education. Philosophical freedoms of conscience and religion receive equal treatment by the state. Congress may not dictate laws that establish or prohibit any religion. Religious acts of public worship should be held in places of worship. Individuals who conduct religious ceremonies outside of places of worship, which requires a permit, are subject to regulatory law. Active clergy may not hold public office, advocate partisan political views, support political candidates, or publicly oppose the laws or institutions of the state.

To establish a religious association, applicants must certify the church or other religious group observes, practices, propagates, or instructs a religious doctrine or body of religious beliefs; has conducted religious activities in the country for at least five years; has established domicile in the country; and shows sufficient assets to achieve its purpose. Registered associations may freely organize their internal structures and adopt bylaws or rules pertaining to their governance and operations, including the training and appointment of their clergy. They may engage in public worship and celebrate acts for the fulfillment of the association's purpose lawfully and without profit. They may propagate their doctrine in accordance with applicable regulations and participate in the creation, management, maintenance, and operation of private welfare, educational, and health institutions, provided the institutions are not for profit.

Religious groups are not required to register with DGAR to operate. Registration is required to negotiate contracts, purchase or rent land, apply for official building permits, receive tax exemptions, or hold religious meetings outside of customary places of worship. A religious group registering for the first time may not register online; its representatives must register in person. Religious groups must apply for permits to construct new buildings or convert existing buildings into places of worship. Any religious building constructed after January 27, 1992, is the property of the religious group that built it and is subject to relevant taxes. All religious buildings erected before then are considered part of the national patrimony and owned by the state.

Religious associations must notify the government of their intention to hold a religious meeting outside their licensed place or places of worship. Religious associations may not hold political meetings of any kind or own or operate radio or television stations. Government permission is required for commercial radio or television to transmit religious programming.

The federal government coordinates religious affairs through SEGOB. Within SEGOB, DGAR promotes religious tolerance, conducts conflict mediation, and investigates cases of religious intolerance. If a party presents a dispute based on allegations of religious intolerance, DGAR may mediate a solution. Each of the 32 states has offices responsible for religious affairs. The National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) is an autonomous federal agency responsible for ensuring nondiscrimination and equal opportunity, including for minority religious groups.

The law provides that prisoners receive dignified and equal treatment from prison staff without distinction based on religious preferences.

The constitution requires that public education be secular and not include religious doctrine. Religious groups may operate private schools that teach religion and hold religious ceremonies at their schools. Private schools affiliated with a religious group are open to all students regardless of their religious beliefs. Students in private schools are exempt from participating in religious courses and activities if the students are not affiliated with the school's religious group. Homeschooling is allowed at the secondary level after completion of schooling at an accredited primary school.

A visa category exists for foreign clergy and religious associates to obtain a temporary resident visa or visitor visa without permission to perform paid religious activities.

The constitution recognizes the right of indigenous communities to autonomy and codifies their right to use their own legal systems for the resolution of conflicts within their communities, while respecting human rights as defined in the constitution and the international treaties to which the country is a signatory. The constitution also protects the right of indigenous leaders to practice their own "uses and customs." This right of self-governance for indigenous communities sometimes conflicts with other rights provided by the constitution, including freedom of religion, for members of those communities.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). It claims both an interpretative statement and a reservation relating to freedom of religion in the covenant. Article 18 of the ICCPR states that countries may limit religious freedom only when it is "necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others." The country's interpretative statement states that religious acts must be performed in places of worship unless granted prior permission and that the education of religious ministers is not officially recognized.

Government Practices

DGAR continued to work with state and local officials to mediate conflicts involving religious intolerance. DGAR investigated four cases related to religious freedom at the federal level during the year, compared with seven in 2019. The cases were in the states of Morelos, Chiapas, and Guerrero. Most of these cases

involved religious minorities who stated members of the majority religious community where they lived had deprived them of their rights and basic services, including water and electricity. At year's end, no updates were available on the cases. According to DGAR, most incidents of religious discrimination should have been filed with the state government because the federal government did not hold jurisdiction. Some NGOs stated municipal and state officials mediated disputes between religious groups, but government officials said this was not official practice. NGOs noted municipal and state officials frequently sided with local leaders at the expense of minority religions. Some groups also said officials rarely pursued legal punishments against offending local leaders, preferring instead to reach informal mediated solutions. According to CSW, informal mediated solutions rarely led to change in the status quo and favored the majority religious group.

During the year, CONAPRED did not receive any complaints of religious discrimination, compared with four in 2019. According to some sources, cases of religious discrimination were often not reported due to lack of awareness of the filing process.

As of September, DGAR listed 9,558 registered religious associations, including an additional 94 groups registered in December 2019. According to DGAR, it did not register any new religious associations during the year due to COVID-19. Registered groups included 9,515 Christian, 12 Buddhist, 10 Jewish, three Islamic, two Hindu, and two International Society for Krishna Consciousness groups as well as 14 new religious expression groups. According to DGAR, new religious expressions groups are philosophical or spiritual communities that might be born of new beliefs or be part of a broader religion; they are on the periphery of traditional religions.

According to media reports, on May 24, the indigenous community of San Jose Puerto Rico, Huixtan, in the state of Chiapas, expelled six evangelical Protestant families. The families said local community authorities arrested and jailed them for not practicing Catholicism. Following their arrests and release, the families abandoned their homes, belongings, and animals.

According to CSW, as of August, community members continued farming in their attempt to appropriate the land of one of four evangelical Protestant families forcibly displaced by community members of Cuamontax, in the state of Hidalgo, in July 2019. On June 15, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief made an inquiry of the government; on August 12, officials of the Mexican

Permanent Mission to the United Nations acknowledged receipt of the inquiry and said they would relay it to relevant offices. As of year's end, the government had not provided a substantive response.

NGOs and some religious organizations continued to state that several rural and indigenous communities expected residents, regardless of their faith, to participate in and fund traditional community religious gatherings and in some cases, to adhere to the majority religion. According to CSW's 2020 report, some Protestant minority families from indigenous communities were denied access to crucial utilities, such as water and electricity, and some children were not allowed to attend local schools because their families did not adhere to the majority religion. In the state of Chiapas, 12 Protestants who were detained and then released in 2019 remained without access to water after declining to participate in Catholic festivities.

In July, the SCJN issued a ruling guaranteeing reintegration and protection for a group of indigenous Jehovah's Witnesses in Tuxpan de Bolanos, in the state of Jalisco. In 2017, community members expelled the Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing to participate in Catholic community activities. The court decided the affected parties should reintegrate into the territory of their communities and ordered state authorities to guarantee their security. The court also ruled the Jehovah's Witnesses should be relocated to a different part of the territory and their prior community could continue to deny their "rights and obligations" as community members "as they no longer share an essential element, their religion." The court ruling restored the Jehovah's Witnesses' access to housing and their personal belongings in the territory as well as the ability to make a living. The court also ruled the Jehovah's Witnesses should be relocated to a different plot of land within the territory because the indigenous community was allowed to exclude the Jehovah's Witnesses from the rights and obligations they would enjoy as full community members. According to CSW, the SCJN's ruling was the first to provide protection for indigenous persons whose rights were reportedly abused through an indigenous community's legally protected "uses and customs."

According to DGAR, the federal government continued to promote dialogue with religious actors with the goal of ensuring the exercise of religious freedom and resolving conflicts involving religious intolerance. In September 2019, SEGOB launched the *National Strategy for the Promotion of Respect and Tolerance of Religious Diversity: We Create Peace*. DGAR advanced the three main pillars of the strategy: dialogue, dissemination, and training to promote religious freedom. Through outreach, DGAR encouraged state and municipal directors to act as

auxiliaries of DGAR and assist in resolving religious intolerance issues immediately to protect the human rights of minority religious group members. According to Jorge Lee Galindo, deputy director general in SEGOB's Religious Issues Office, DGAR trained government employees and religious leaders on DGAR's paperwork process during the year so they could access the services DGAR offers at the municipal and state levels.

Religions for Inclusion, a government-run interfaith working group, held several meetings to discuss gender-based violence, generalized violence, efforts to search for the disappeared, and COVID-19. The group regularly discussed their experiences with religious intolerance or discrimination. CONAPRED established Religions for Inclusion to create institutional dialogue to deepen its understanding of other faiths, build common ground, and coordinate collective action on issues involving shared social concerns. Members of the group included leaders of the Protestant, evangelical Christian, Roman Catholic, Church of Jesus Christ, LLDM, Old Catholic Church (Veterocatolica), Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Baha'i, Buddhist, and Church of Scientology communities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religious leaders were often involved in political and social activism, thus often being exposed to generalized violence, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being based on religious identity. The CMC identified the country as the most violent country for priests in Latin America for the 12th year in a row, stating that over two dozen priests were killed over the past decade and emphasizing the situation reflected the high levels of generalized violence in the country. According to some NGOs and media reports, organized crime groups continued to single out some Catholic priests and other religious leaders and subject them to killings, extortion attempts, death threats, kidnappings, and intimidation, reportedly due to their perceived access to financial resources or their work helping migrants. According to CSW, while the high levels of fear and lack of documentation made it difficult to assess the extent of criminal group harassment of and attacks on religious figures, both Catholic and Protestant leaders said the impact on religious freedom was "alarming." Also according to CSW, some religious leaders said local and state police labeled the attacks and killings of religious leaders as "common crime," rather than investigating the cases fully. Federal government officials and Catholic Church authorities continued to state that these incidents were not a result of religious beliefs, but rather were incidents related to the overall security situation and crime. According to NGO sources, criminal elements attacked Catholic priests and other religious figures to create

fear in the community and a culture of silence, which allowed their acts, such as drug and weapons trafficking, to continue unhindered.

Multiple NGOs said religious leaders of varied denominations and religions were attacked, kidnapped, and threatened throughout the year, including the killings of two evangelical Christian pastors in two separate incidents. According to CSW, in May, individuals kidnapped a pastor in the state of Guanajuato, whom they killed after they did not receive ransom; no additional details regarding motive were available. According to press reporting, in August, perpetrators of a targeted home invasion killed a female leader of the Christian group New Order in the state of Chihuahua. No motive for the killing was apparent. Members of the New Order condemned the killing and called on the government to stop the violence and protect the community. According to the CMC, in January, a group of assailants kidnapped, tortured, and attempted to kill a Catholic priest, Father Roly Candelario Pina Camacho, in Puebla. Attackers shot him multiple times and abandoned him on the Puebla-Mexico City highway after family members paid a ransom. The priest sought help and survived. In April, Catholic priest Marcelo Perez, based in the state of Chiapas, received death threats by telephone, presumably from a cartel, according to media reports. According to Perez, the caller threatened not only him, but his family and his congregants if he did not “get in line” with the cartel’s demands. According to a church press release, the cartel threatened to massacre worshippers in the church. At year’s end, the CMC did not have record of any Catholic priests killed in the country during the year, compared with one Catholic priest killed in 2019.

According to the CMC, unidentified individuals burglarized, vandalized, and committed acts of violence against churches, with a weekly average of 27 Catholic churches affected throughout the year. Some of the incidents reportedly involved women seeking access to birth control and the legalization of abortion, which the Catholic Church opposes. According to media, on March 9, demonstrators in several marches organized for International Women’s Day vandalized church buildings, public structures, and businesses. The same day, a small group of protesters advocating support for abortion rights threw paint and flammable liquids at Mexico City’s cathedral. Small numbers of Catholic Church supporters tried to protect the cathedral. Protesters also vandalized Catholic churches in the states of Xalapa, Campeche, and Hermosillo.

Jewish community representatives assessed online anti-Semitic messages, symbols, and language from January through September 17, finding Twitter accounted for 69 percent of the anti-Semitic content, news sources 18 percent, online forums 8

percent, and blogs 4.5 percent. Anti-Semitic tweets typically referenced the Holocaust and Hitler, used other derogatory language, and questioned Israel's right to exist.

In September, Volkswagen apologized after a customer visiting one of its showrooms tweeted a photograph of a World War II Nazi rally being addressed by Adolf Hitler, replete with a large swastika, hanging on the showroom's walls. The tweet quickly went viral. The customer had photographed the image during a visit to the showroom, located in Coyoacan Municipality near Mexico City. In a letter to Steffen Reiche, the president of Volkswagen's operations in Mexico, the Simon Wiesenthal Centre urged the company to cut ties with the dealership where the Nazi imagery was displayed. "We expect you to immediately identify those responsible and publicly announce the action you will take. The most appropriate would be to drop the concession completely to pass a clear message to your customers that you have learned from your history," the letter stated.

In February, the Pew Research Center published findings on attitudes towards democratic principles, such as regular elections, free speech, and free civil society, as well as religious freedom, in 34 countries, based on interviews it conducted in its *Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey*. According to the findings, 52 percent of Mexican respondents considered religious freedom to be "very important," ranking it second of their priorities for democratic principles among the nine tested.

Religions for Peace, an interreligious working group, continued to be active in the country, conducting interfaith roundtables and outreach events. Member groups included the Jewish Communities of Mexico, Buddhist Community of Mexico, Sufi Yerrahi Community of Mexico, Sikh Dharma Community of Mexico, Anglican Church, Lutheran Church, and the Church of Jesus Christ.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy and consulate representatives met regularly with government officials responsible for religious and indigenous affairs at both the federal and state levels. Embassy and consulate human rights officers regularly and repeatedly raised these issues with foreign affairs and interior secretariat officials. U.S. officials raised concerns regarding the continued harassment of religious leaders and abuses against religious minorities, especially evangelical Protestants, by religious majority groups and local authorities.

The Ambassador and a senior embassy official met with religious and civil society leaders during travel throughout the country to reinforce the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom. In January, a senior embassy officer met with the president of the Central Committee of the Jewish Community in Mexico and expressed appreciation for the committee's work on anti-Semitism. In August, the Ambassador spoke to leaders of the Central Committee of the Jewish Community in Mexico and learned more about the community's response to COVID-19. In October, the Ambassador visited the Jewish Documentation and Investigation Center, where he highlighted the importance of religious freedom and tolerance.

In January, the Ambassador visited Colegio Israelita (Israelite School), a private kindergarten to 12th grade Jewish school in Mexico City, and gave brief remarks at its Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony. The Ambassador stressed the United States will continue to defend human rights as well as combat anti-Semitism or any other form of hatred.

Embassy representatives met with members of religious groups and religiously affiliated NGOs, including the Central Jewish Committee, CMC, and CSW, to discuss the safety of religious workers focusing on humanitarian issues, assess the status of religious freedom, and express support for religious tolerance.