

# PARAGUAY 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution accords individuals the right to choose, change, and freely practice their religion and prohibits religious discrimination. It specifically recognizes the right of indigenous communities to express their religions freely. The constitution states the relationship between the state and the Roman Catholic Church is based on independence, cooperation, and autonomy. The Vice Ministry of Worship (VMW) continued to implement a law requiring all religious and philosophical groups to complete a mandatory registration process, but did not impose penalties or monetary sanctions on groups that did not register by the end of 2019, extending the deadline until after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the VMW, approximately 15 percent of religious groups were registered at year's end. In January, the VMW denied the registration of the Catholic Christian Apostolic National Church of Paraguay (ICCAN) due to its similarity in name with the Roman Catholic Church, although the VMW had approved ICCAN as a legal entity in 2019. In February, ICCAN appealed the VMW's decision, leading to discussions with the VMW in an attempt to find a compromise that would allow for ICCAN's registration. Discussions, however, were unsuccessful, and in November, the VMW rejected ICCAN's appeal. The Jehovah's Witnesses Association reported that three cases involving individual Jehovah's Witnesses receiving a hospital blood transfusion against their will remained pending in the courts at year's end due to COVID-19 pandemic delays.

Some religious representatives said the Roman Catholic Church exercised more influence in politics by swaying public opinion than any other religious group. Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish religious groups expressed regret that they were not able to hold any in-person interfaith dialogues during the COVID-19 pandemic. On May 15, the Roman Catholic Church hosted a religious service to honor the country's independence. Although Roman Catholic clergy were present for the service in person, all other attendees – among them, President Mario Abdo Benitez, other members of the government, and individuals from other religious groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jews, and evangelical Protestants – participated virtually. Evangelical Protestant leaders held two informal, in-person interdenominational dialogues with Roman Catholic and other Christian denominations in May and October. On November 20, the VMW hosted a virtual Interreligious Symposium on the Promotion of Peace Through the Practice of Values, open to all religious groups with a presence in the country.

In October, U.S. embassy officials met with VMW Director General Marco Mendez and discussed ICCAN's registration status, government actions to facilitate the registration process, the promotion of religious freedom, interreligious dialogue, and the provision of state funding for schools run by religious groups. Embassy officials met with representatives of the Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Mennonite, Church of Jesus Christ, Muslim, ICCAN, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jewish communities to discuss interfaith respect for religious diversity and hear their views on the status of religious freedom in the country and the government's attitude towards and treatment of their communities.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.2 million (midyear 2020 estimate). The VMW estimates 88 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 6 percent evangelical Protestant. The Association of Evangelical Ministers of Paraguay estimates that 9.6 percent of the population is evangelical Protestant. Groups that together constitute between 1 and 4 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, the Church of Jesus Christ, Muslims, Buddhists, Mennonites, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), Baha'is, and adherents of indigenous beliefs.

Members of the Mennonite Church, estimated by Church leaders to number 46,000, are prominent in the remote areas of the central Chaco and some eastern regions of the country. ICCAN estimates its membership at more than 100,000. The Church of Jesus Christ estimates it has 70,000 members. Jehovah's Witnesses estimate the group's membership at 12,000. According to Muslim leaders, there are approximately 10,000 Muslims, with the majority in Ciudad del Este. According to representatives of the Jewish community, there are approximately 1,000 Jews, living primarily in Asuncion.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides individuals, including members of indigenous communities, the right to choose, change, and freely practice their religion. The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and specifically recognizes the right of indigenous communities to express their religion freely.

According to the constitution, the relationship between the state and the Roman Catholic Church is based on “independence, cooperation, and autonomy.” The Church, however, must comply with all regulations the state imposes on other religious groups. The law allows political parties based on a specific faith, but the constitution prohibits active members of the clergy from any religious group from running for public office.

The law requires all religious and philosophical groups to register with the VMW and submit annual reports stating the organization’s key leadership and functions. Organizations must complete a form containing 14 items and provide supporting documents to the VMW to register. The form requests basic information, including entity name, mission or vision, history in the country, church or temple addresses, membership size, and types of activities. The VMW also requires the certification of a legal representative and the entity’s bylaws as supporting documentation for registration. VMW regulations require that names of religious entities be sufficiently distinguishable to avoid confusing worshippers. Once registered, religious and philosophical groups must update their registration on an annual basis and pay an annual fee of 62,000 guaranies (\$9).

The VMW may apply nonmonetary administrative sanctions against organizations that fail to register, including ordering the suspension of religious services. The National Anti-Money Laundering Secretariat requires that all religious organizations register as nonfinancial agents. Religious groups must demonstrate legal status as a nonprofit organization and agree to annual recertification. Annual recertification requires groups to resubmit the registration form with updated information. Religious leaders must submit to financial and criminal background checks.

The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools. The constitution provides private schools the right to offer religious education; staff teaching these courses are required to “possess suitability and ethical integrity.” Registration for private religious schools is not mandatory, but the Ministry of Education and Culture recognizes only diplomas and degrees granted by registered institutions. Additionally, only registered schools with nonprofit status may receive subsidies for teachers’ salaries. Students belonging to religious groups other than the one associated with a private religious school may enroll; however, all students are expected to participate in religious activities that are a mandatory part of the schedule.

The constitution and laws provide for conscientious objection to military service based on religious beliefs.

Foreign missionaries who are members of registered religious groups are eligible for no-cost residency visas from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. They must also register annually with the VMW to receive official documentation identifying their status as missionaries. Missionaries choosing not to register may enter the country on tourist visas. A law provides for Mennonites to implement their own education programs and exempts them from military service based on their religious beliefs.

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

### **Government Practices**

The VMW did not impose penalties or monetary sanctions on religious groups that did not complete its mandatory registration process by the end of 2019, extending the deadline until after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. It continued to focus on raising public awareness of the registration law and at year's end had not set a date for enforcing compliance. The VMW stated it continued to implement the registration law consistently across religious groups; once it received all required information and documents from a religious group, it completed the process in 15 days.

According to the VMW, 16 new groups registered during the year, bringing the total of religious groups having active registrations with the government to 576, compared with 560 at the end of 2019. Of the 576 groups, 440 were not able to renew their registration during the year due to COVID-19 restrictions limiting requisite travel to Asuncion. According to the VMW, however, it considered these groups to be actively registered because it extended the renewal period during the pandemic.

According to the VMW, approximately 15 percent of religious groups were registered at year's end. Although the VMW implemented online registration in June, a major barrier for submitting and renewing applications was the requirement to travel to Asuncion to pay registration fees and pick up proof of registration.

In November, the Church of Jesus Christ again expressed concern VMW requirements implemented in 2019 sought personal information, including names, telephone numbers, addresses of leaders, and email addresses of all their missionaries, which the Church said they were not comfortable sharing. The

requirements also included information on affiliated churches in the country, such as physical address as well as email, name of leader, and phone number. The representative said the Church conveyed its concerns to the VMW, which unofficially agreed to grant the registration without sensitive information.

Although ICCAN met all other legal requirements, which the VMW recognized in 2019, the VMW did not approve its registration due to its inclusion of “Catholic” in its title, making ICCAN’s name not sufficiently distinguishable from the Roman Catholic Church. The VMW stated there was no other reason for its decision and would approve ICCAN’s registration if the two religious groups could agree on an acceptable change to ICCAN’s official name. In February, ICCAN appealed the VMW’s decision, leading to discussions with the VMW in an attempt to find a compromise that would enable ICCAN’s registration. According to ICCAN, discussions were unsuccessful, and in November, the VMW rejected ICCAN’s appeal.

By year’s end, the Jehovah’s Witnesses Association reported three cases from previous years involving individual Jehovah’s Witnesses receiving hospital blood transfusions against their will remained pending due to court processing delays during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2019, the Jehovah’s Witnesses Association won an appeal in a forced blood transfusion case against the Social Security Institute in a court of second instance, but at year’s end, the association was awaiting a Supreme Court ruling after the Social Security Institute appealed the ruling. At year’s end, no judges were assigned to rule on the appeal. The Jehovah’s Witnesses Association stated there were no new reports of forced blood transfusions during the year. According to the association, a potential incident in November, when a hospital requested authorization to perform a blood transfusion, became moot at the last minute because the hospital was able to apply an alternative treatment. Although association representatives said the outcome was favorable, they stated the case demonstrated hospitals did not respect their religious beliefs and the association would consider legal recourse.

The VMW reported the Ministry of Education provided subsidies to 494 schools during the year, of which 252 were Roman Catholic and 242 were of various other religious affiliations. The ministry stated it distributed subsidies based primarily on the need to reach certain underserved communities, focusing especially on the underserved rural Chaco region. The ministry continued to subsidize the salaries of hundreds of teachers in registered, nonprofit schools operated by predominantly Roman Catholic religious groups. According to representatives of the Mennonite community, the government continued to provide subsidies to their schools; Jewish

community members said they did not request government subsidies. According to a ministry representative, the ministry maintained an agreement with the Roman Catholic Church governing the allocation of subsidies to schools in areas not served by public schools. The representative also stated that a separate agreement set very similar regulations for subsidy allocation to other religious schools located in underserved areas serving student populations and providing educational or scholarship services to students. Mennonite schools in Boqueron Department continued a consultation process with departmental authorities consisting of a continuous dialogue concerning Mennonite and Ministry of Education curricular priorities.

The VMW reported that 106 foreign missionaries registered or reregistered during the year, compared with 353 in 2019, a decrease observers attributed to COVID-19-related border closures that began in March and were still largely in place at the end of the year. Most missionaries were members of the Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant Churches. In March, all 114 foreign missionaries of the Church of Jesus Christ departed the country on flights chartered by the Church due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The government continued to support chaplaincy programs open to all religious groups in the armed forces. The programs included the training of clergy to provide services to members of the armed forces deployed either in combat zones or on peacekeeping missions. The government also continued to allow all registered religious groups to operate in and provide their services within prisons for adults and youth; however, during the year, only Roman Catholic and Protestant groups made use of this option.

On November 20, the VMW hosted a virtual National Interreligious Symposium on the Promotion of Peace Through the Practice of Values, open to all religious group with a presence in the country. Event goals included the promotion of peaceful coexistence, diversity, and interreligious dialogue. The VMW also used the event to increase awareness of the registration system for religious groups.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Observers, including those from nongovernmental organizations, political pundits, leaders of different religious groups, and the press, stated the Roman Catholic Church continued to maintain an influential role within society and government that gave it an advantage over other religious groups in the country. According to media reports, because Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion, both citizens

and the government valued the opinion of the Church on political matters. Church representatives often commented publicly on congressional legislation, sometimes impacting the shaping of public policy. On December 5, Church statements that a proposed National Plan for Childhood and Adolescence for 2020-2024 would promote the destruction of conservative family values, which sources stated contributed to public and political criticism of the plan, eventually forcing Minister of Childhood and Adolescence Teresa Martinez to withdraw it for redrafting.

On May 15, the Roman Catholic Church hosted a service to honor the country's independence. Although Church clergy performed the service in-person, all other attendees – including President Benitez, other members of the government, and individuals from other religious groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ, Jews, and evangelical Protestants – participated virtually. During the service, the Roman Catholic Church criticized the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, calling for an end to corruption that could jeopardize efforts to confront the virus, and for government assistance to be distributed fairly across vulnerable communities.

Roman Catholic Church representatives, in consultation with the Ministry of Health, canceled in-person services celebrating the December 8 “Virgen de Caacupe” holiday, a local variant of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, due to COVID-19 concerns. Although the Church announced that services would proceed virtually, many pilgrims traveled to Caacupe, prompting the Ministry of Health to impose movement restrictions in the city.

The Public Prosecutor's Ethnic Rights Office reported it did not receive any reports of conflict between indigenous and nonindigenous religious groups by year's end. The Public Prosecutor's Office closed its investigation into the case of an evangelical Protestant pastor who exorcized an elderly indigenous shaman against his will in 2018 after the pastor admitted guilt. In accordance with a plea agreement between the defendant and the office, the pastor was allowed to continue leading his community, but under legal probation, with the possibility of prison time for a repeat offense. The Public Prosecutor's Office, rather than the VMW, investigated the case because the indigenous religious leader said the pastor had also stolen items from him. According to media reports, the pastor belonged to the Pentecostal Church Prince of Peace, an unregistered church.

At year's end, representatives of the local Jewish community said they continued to monitor a group known as Identidad Nacional (IN), formerly called Paraguay Nacional Socialista (PNS), that actively espoused Nazi and xenophobic ideology in

2016-2017 but had since either disappeared or gone underground. According to members of the Jewish community, IN did not attack any individuals or publish anti-Semitic statements during the year. Jewish community members said they had confidence in the security forces and the private security companies the community hired to protect places of worship, schools, and community centers.

Evangelical Protestant leaders held two in-person, informal, interdenominational dialogues with Roman Catholic and other Christian denominations in May and October. The dialogues promoted Christian religious diversity and mutual respect while addressing common challenges Paraguayans faced, such as the pandemic and drought. Evangelical Protestant leaders also conducted training sessions for pastors with the stated objective of helping make their sermons more inclusive and tolerant.

Christian and Jewish groups continued to communicate with representatives from other religious groups, but all official, in-person interreligious events were canceled due to COVID-19 restrictions. These groups did not host any official virtual interreligious events during the year.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

In October, embassy officials met with VMW Director General Mendez to discuss issues related to ICCAN's registration process, government actions to facilitate the registration of other religious groups, the promotion of religious freedom, interreligious dialogue, and the provision of state funding for salaries at schools run by religious groups.

Embassy officials met with Roman Catholic, Mennonite, Muslim, ICCAN, evangelical Protestant, Church of Jesus Christ, and Jewish leaders to discuss interfaith respect for religious diversity and hear their views on the state of religious freedom in the country and the government's attitude towards and treatment of their communities.