

HONDURAS 2019 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. In August Muslim leaders reported members of their community regularly encountered unnecessary bureaucratic and discriminatory barriers when requesting basic governmental services or permits. These leaders cited the challenges a Muslim group faced when trying to secure a municipal permit for a public humanitarian event on gender-based violence in the town of La Esperanza, Intibuca Department. Some sectors of society continued expressing their concerns and opposition towards political activism by evangelical Protestant groups and the Roman Catholic Church, citing practices such as prayers at official government events. Seventh-day Adventists stated some public educational institutions did not respect their religious observance on Saturdays because the official work week was Monday to Saturday.

During the year, the Inter-Ecclesiastical Forum (FIH) – an interfaith nongovernmental organization (NGO) representing more than 90 religious and civil society groups – and the Evangelical Fellowship of Honduras (CEH) together reported the deaths of four evangelical Protestant pastors. Both groups attributed these deaths to the high prevalence of gang activity and minimal state presence in their areas of operation. The CEH and FIH both reported widespread extortion of church leaders and congregation members by gangs and criminal groups. Muslim leaders reported incidents where evangelical Protestant members appeared at Islamic religious services, displaying intolerance towards their community. The FIH and the Muslim community each reported conducting community events and media outreach to promote religious freedom and tolerance.

U.S. embassy officials met with officials of the Secretariat of Human Rights and the autonomous National Commission of Human Rights (CONADEH) to discuss issues of religious freedom, including allegations of discrimination against Muslims. On October 30, embassy officials hosted an interfaith roundtable in San Pedro Sula to discuss religious freedom and tolerance. This discussion touched on a variety of topics, including religious freedom in schools, the challenges of some faith groups in addressing bureaucratic issues with the government, and migration. 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 9.3 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the Digital Christian Observatory, the most recent survey covering 2017-18, 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, Antiochian Orthodox Apostolic Catholic Church, Muslims, Jews, Baha'is, 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. A number of 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 Muslim community, there are approximately 2,600 members, mostly Sunni; approximately 90 percent are converts. The Antioquia Orthodox Apostolic Catholic community counts nearly 1,800 members. The Jewish community states it has approximately 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 same article of 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 – describing 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 are unable to obtain tax-exempt status or other benefits.

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 run schools, including the Roman Catholic Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and evangelical Protestant churches. 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 a local institution or individual 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 about 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 guarantee the free exercise of religion without preference for one specific religion, as long as that worship is not against the law or public order. Prisoners have access to religious counseling from leaders of their faith.

The government authorizes clergy from all religions to conduct marriage ceremonies. The government legally recognizes only civil marriages conducted with a lawyer authorized to perform marriage ceremonies. Most couples complete the civil ceremony before the religious one.

The official work week is Monday to Saturday, with no exceptions for religious groups that celebrate Saturday as a religious holiday or day of rest.

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

Government Practices

Some religious organizations, including the FIH, said the government continued to give preference to the Roman Catholic Church and to religious groups belonging to the evangelical Protestant umbrella organization CEH. The FIH again stated the government routinely invited Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders, but not representatives from other religious groups, to lead prayers at government events and to participate in official functions, committees, and other joint government-civil society activities.

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. At year's end, the DRRSAC registered 120 religious associations, compared with 133 in 2018. According to the DRRSAC, it did not deny any registration requests by religious associations during the year.

In August Muslim leaders reported members of their community regularly encountered unnecessary bureaucratic and discriminatory barriers when requesting basic governmental services or permits. These leaders cited the challenges a Muslim group faced when trying to secure a municipal permit for a public

humanitarian event on gender-based violence in the town of La Esperanza, Intibuca Department.

Representatives of CONADEH stated they had not received recent complaints alleging violations of religious freedom but said they would remain vigilant.

According to media reports, in April the Secretariat of Governance, Justice, and Decentralization announced the appointment of Rabbi Aaron Lankry, a member of Chabad and a noncitizen, as “Chief Rabbi of Honduras.” A representative of the secretariat later stated that Lankry had registered an NGO.

Representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church continued to express concerns regarding religious freedom at schools and other private and public institutions; they said students had problems obtaining permission to be absent from class or excused from taking exams on Saturdays. Seventh-day Adventist representatives said some of their members faced continued discrimination when applying for or retaining jobs because their religious beliefs did not permit them to work on Saturdays. They again noted the Supreme Court had not addressed a constitutional challenge that Adventist students filed in 2015 seeking alternatives to taking classes or exams on Saturdays.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The CEH and FIH continued to state most violence against its members originated from criminal organizations, noting many of its member churches were present in areas of high violence with minimal state presence. The FIH and CEH together reported the deaths of four evangelical pastors in urban areas, including the August 25 killing of a pastor in Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara Department, and the October 9 killing of a pastor in San Pedro Sula, Cortes Department. Both groups attributed these deaths to the high prevalence of gang activity and minimal state presence in their areas of responsibility. The CEH expressed satisfaction that authorities were investigating the four killings but underscored authorities had made little progress in their investigation of the October 9 killing.

Both the CEH and FIH noted an increase in threats targeting evangelical Protestant pastors and church leaders located in areas known for gang or narcotics trafficking activities. The FIH said evangelical Protestant pastors and missionaries had left the historically violent Chamelecon neighborhood, a suburb of San Pedro Sula, because of death threats. The CEH reported the kidnapping and killing of an evangelical Protestant pastor in Comayagua, Comayagua Department. The CEH

stated the killing was likely tied to gang activity. The CEH also cited the alleged July kidnapping of another evangelical Protestant pastor in Colon Department, who turned up alive following his 16-day disappearance. The CEH reported instances where member churches were robbed and vandalized; it also reported widespread extortion of Protestant church leaders and congregation members by criminal organizations. Despite the attacks, the CEH continued to positively assess government efforts to dismantle gangs, noting an overall decline in the level of violence and increase in the incarceration of many gang operatives.

The Catholic Archdiocese of Tegucigalpa commented that its priests and laypersons operated throughout the country. It did not record any killings of Church officials but reported infrequent incidents of robberies and threats.

Muslim leaders reported incidents where evangelical Protestant members appeared at Islamic religious services, displaying intolerance towards their community. Muslim leaders noted they were approached by evangelical Protestants at their place of worship at the Centro America Shopping Center in Tegucigalpa. The Muslim leaders said evangelical Protestants told the Muslims to leave the country and defaced books on Islam on a table in front of the meeting site.

Muslim women reported they were reluctant to wear a hijab on the way to their workplace because of negative comments. Some Muslims said private sector offices continued to prohibit women from wearing hijabs, and that individuals in some government offices also showed intolerance for traditional religious clothing.

Muslim community representatives said they received a few derogatory messages on social media but emphasized they received far more positive and supportive comments than negative messages.

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

The FIH and the Muslim community each reported conducting community events and outreach to promote religious freedom and tolerance. The FIH reported conducting three press conferences and 12 additional media appearances. Muslim leaders said they used social media messages to provide information about Islam to the general public.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with officials of the Secretariat of Human Rights and CONADEH to discuss issues of religious freedom, including allegations of discrimination against Muslims.

Embassy officials continued discussions with religious leaders and members of religious communities, including Roman Catholics, the CEH, the FIH, Orthodox Christians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, and Muslims, regarding societal violence and concerns about the government's dealings with religious groups, religious observance at school, and legal recognition for religious organizations. On September 26, embassy officials met with Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez to discuss religious freedom in the country, migration, and violence against gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex persons.

On October 30, embassy officials hosted an interfaith roundtable in San Pedro Sula to discuss religious freedom and tolerance, including religious freedom in schools and the challenges of some faith groups in addressing bureaucratic issues, such as taxation of personnel and difficulties obtaining residency permits for foreign clergy, as well as migration.