

# MEXICO 2019 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. Article 40 of 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 Associations (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 seven cases related to religious freedom at the federal level, compared with 11 in 2018. Government officials again stated that the killings and attacks on Catholic priests and evangelical Protestant pastors reflected high levels of generalized violence throughout the country and not targeted attacks based on religious faith. The press reported representatives from federal, state, and municipal governments worked with members of an indigenous community in Altamirano, Chiapas State, to resolve a conflict that began in 2018 and led to the expulsion of evangelical Protestant families from the town for practicing a religion other than Roman Catholicism and refusing to support traditional cultural events. Under terms of a signed agreement, members of the displaced families returned but lived in a separate community. According to DGAR, 182 new religious associations were registered during the year, of which 28 were Catholic and 154 represented other groups, primarily evangelical Pentecostals.

Because religious leaders are often involved in politics and social activism, thus often being exposed to generalized violence, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Killings and abductions of priests and pastors continued. Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) reported the killings of five religious leaders and the kidnapping of three others by unidentified individuals. The Catholic Multimedia Center (CMC) identified Mexico as the most violent country for priests in Latin America for the 11th year in a row, stating it was a reflection of the high levels of generalized violence in the country. Some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to say criminal groups targeted Catholic priests and other religious leaders for their denunciation of criminal activities and because communities viewed them as moral authority figures. According to CSW, the 28 families whom local authorities expelled from Yashtinin, Chiapas State, in 2015 were still unable to return home because they refused to participate in traditional indigenous cultural events. According to the

National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED), non-Catholics and atheists were most likely to face discrimination in education, health, and at the workplace. The report found religious minorities tended to have slightly lower than average rates of school attendance, labor contracts, and access to medical benefits. Individuals identifying with these groups said they also had a slightly higher rate of illiteracy compared with the national average.

U.S. embassy and consulate officials met with government counterparts, religious organizations, and NGOs throughout the country to discuss concerns about violence toward religious leaders, as well as reports of discrimination toward religious minorities in some communities. Embassy officials met with members of religious groups and NGOs to gather details about specific cases, including the Cuamontax Huazalingo Protestant community in Hidalgo State.

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

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 127.3 million (midyear 2019 estimate). According to the 2010 census, approximately 83 percent identify as Catholic, 5 percent evangelical Protestant, 1.6 percent Pentecostal, 1.4 percent Jehovah's Witnesses, and 0.5 percent Jewish. Other religious groups include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) and Muslims. More than 2 percent of the population report practicing a religion not otherwise specified, and nearly 5 percent report not practicing any religion. Some indigenous persons adhere to syncretic religions drawing from indigenous beliefs.

Official statistics based on self-identification during the 2010 census sometimes differ from the membership figures stated by religious groups. Approximately 315,000 individuals identified themselves as members of the Church of Jesus Christ. Church of Jesus Christ officials, however, state their membership is approximately 1.3 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, including Seventh-day Adventists; however, fewer than 5 percent of 2010 census respondents in Chiapas identified themselves as evangelical Protestant.

According to the 2010 census, the Jewish community totals approximately 67,500 persons, of whom nearly 42,000 live in Mexico City and the state of Mexico. According to SEGOB, nearly half of the country's approximately 4,000 Muslims are concentrated in Mexico City and the state of Mexico. According to a 2017 Pew Foundation study, the Muslim community numbers fewer than 10,000

persons. There is also an Ahmadi Muslim population of several hundred living in Chiapas State, most of whom are converts of ethnic Tzotzil Maya origin. There are also small indigenous communities of Baha'is that number in the hundreds. An estimated half of the country's approximately 100,000 Mennonites are concentrated in the state of Chihuahua.

## **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. 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. CONAPRED is an autonomous federal agency responsible for ensuring nondiscrimination and equal opportunity, including for minority religious groups.

The law provides prisoners 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 seven cases related to religious freedom at the federal level during the year, compared with 11 in 2018. Most of these cases involved religious minorities, generally families, 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, all of the cases were pending; three were from Hidalgo State, one from Guerrero State, one from Puebla State, one from Chiapas State, and one from Mexico State. According to DGAR, most incidents of religious discrimination should have been filed with the state government because the federal government did not have jurisdiction. Municipal and state officials commonly mediated disputes between religious groups. Some groups again 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. For example, Protestants in the community of Cuamontax, Hidalgo State, signed a conflict resolution agreement in February mandating their participation in, and financial contribution to, Catholic festivals. The groups continued to report there were insufficient resources devoted to federal and state agencies that work on religious freedom.

During the year, CONAPRED received four complaints of religious discrimination, compared with five in 2018. Individuals filed three complaints against public officials related to religious discrimination, and one individual filed a complaint for discrimination in a private sector workplace.

According to press reports, local authorities expelled an indigenous family of 10 from their village of Tajlovijho, Chiapas State, in August after the family converted to evangelical Protestantism.

Representatives from federal, state, and municipal governments worked with members of an indigenous community in Altamirano, Chiapas State, to resolve a conflict that began in 2018 between community members and evangelical Protestant families, who were expelled from the village for practicing a religion other than Catholicism. Under terms of a signed agreement, members of the displaced families returned but lived isolated from the main community.

In April CSW published follow-up reporting on a case that began in 2012 in the community of Yashtinin, San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas State. In 2012 village authorities detained 16 individuals and then expelled them from the community for converting from Catholicism to evangelical Protestantism. By 2015, 28 families had been forced to leave Yashtinin for their religious beliefs. During the year, CSW representatives met with some of the displaced persons and found that although authorities were notified of the situation and promised recourse, the individuals still were not allowed to return.

As of November 7, there were 9,464 religious associations registered by DGAR, compared with 9,416 in 2018, an increase of 48. Registered groups included 9,421 Christian (an increase of 315 from 2018), 12 Buddhist, 10 Jewish, three Islamic, two Hindu, and two International Society for Krishna Consciousness groups. Baha'is and Ahmadi Muslims remained unregistered. According to DGAR, 182 new religious associations were registered during the year, of which 28 were Catholic and 154 representing other groups, primarily evangelical Pentecostals. The total number of associations was only 48 higher than 2018 because some previously registered groups removed themselves.

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 adhere to the majority religion. Local authorities detained 12 evangelical Christians in April in the community of Chiquinivalvo, located in the municipality of Zinacantan, Chiapas State, for refusing to participate in a Catholic celebration. Authorities released the detainees after federal government intervention with the Zinacantan City Council. When the detainees returned home following their release, local authorities had disconnected their water and electricity.

According to DGAR, the federal government continued to promote dialogue with religious actors with the stated goal of ensuring the exercise of religious freedom and resolving conflicts involving religious intolerance. On September 20, SEGOB launched the “National Strategy for the Promotion of Respect and Tolerance of Religious Diversity: We Create Peace.” Government officials emphasized the separation of church and state would not be impacted by the new strategy.

According to Jorge Lee Galindo, deputy director general in SEGOB’s Religious Issues Office, the strategy was a concerted effort by elements of the government to work together to promote religious freedom. It comprises three pillars focused on raising awareness about the country’s religious diversity; improving dialogue among religious groups; and creating networks at the state and municipal levels dedicated to religious freedom. Actions included convening roundtables and workshops and implementing courses for state-level officials and elementary school students about religious freedom issues.

In May the Commission for Human Rights in Mexico City held the “First Gathering for Cultural Diversity,” which focused on religious diversity. Present at the event were representatives from CONAPRED, the federal Council to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination in Mexico City, and the federal Department of Education. During the event, CONAPRED President Alexandra Haas Pacuic acknowledged religious minorities in the country faced prejudice and barriers, including at institutional levels. She also identified religion as one of the main causes of discrimination in the country, particularly in public settings, public transportation, school, and work. Haas Pacuic further noted discrimination based on religion often intersected with other forms of discrimination, including racial and ethnic, and that religious disputes were also commonly related to disputes over natural resources or political issues. Representatives from Anglican, Baptist, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Lutheran, Muslim, and Sikh religious groups participated in the meeting.

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

Because religious leaders are often involved in politics and social activism, thus often being exposed to generalized violence, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. The CMC identified Mexico as the most violent country for priests in Latin America for the 11th year in a row. According to some NGOs and media reports, organized crime groups continued to target 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. Federal government officials and Catholic Church authorities stated these incidents were not a result of targeting for religious beliefs, but rather, incidents related to the overall security situation and crime. Some NGOs stated they believed criminals targeted Catholic priests because communities viewed them as moral authority figures.

According to press reports in June, attackers shot and killed Pastor Aaron Bosques Montes of the Roma Christian Church in Cuernavaca, Morelos State. Bosques Montes reportedly resisted extortion attempts by a criminal group and evaded an attempted kidnapping by the same group. The pastor had filed a formal complaint against local gang leaders, the Ortega Velez brothers, with the Attorney General's Office, the contents of which were allegedly leaked.

According to CSW, an assailant killed Pastor Alfrery Lictor Cruz Canseco in his car after an August 19 church service in Tlaxiactac de Cabrera, Oaxaca State. Members of the congregation detained the attacker, who was subsequently arrested by authorities, but a possible motive for the crime was not made public. Media sites suggested the attack could be related to criminal groups perceiving religious leaders as threats to their authority.

According to media reports and an official statement released by the Diocese of Matamoros, on August 22, Catholic priest Jose Martin Guzman Vega was found stabbed to death inside his parish, Cristo Rey de La Paz, on the outskirts of Matamoros, Tamaulipas State. Neighbors said they heard cries for help and found the priest near the church's entrance. The Tamaulipas State Attorney General's Office was investigating the killing but made no arrests by year's end.

In November nine members of families belonging to an offshoot Mormon group associated with the Church of Jesus Christ and living in Rancho La Mora, Sonora State, were ambushed and killed by individuals associated with a drug cartel. According to Mexican and FBI investigations of the killings, the motive of the killers was not related to the victims' faith or membership in a religious group, because neither the individuals nor the Mormon group were the intended targets.

CSW expressed particular concern about religious freedom violations in Hidalgo State because of continuing problems related to displacements of minority religious groups and lack of progress in addressing these displacements. In September attackers killed evangelical Protestant Pastor Omar Romero Cruz and another person in Ixmiquilpan, San Miguel, Hidalgo State. CSW reported the

assailants were believed to be members of organized crime, but authorities reported they had not established a motive, and the investigation continued through year's end. CSW reported that on August 3, a criminal group that had previously attempted to kidnap Cuban migrants for ransom abducted evangelical Pastor Aaron Mendez Ruiz, director of a migrant shelter in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas State. Media outlets stated the Cartel del Noreste (Northeast Cartel) was responsible for the kidnapping. At year's end, the pastor's whereabouts remained unknown. Media outlets and social media accounts reported the same cartel was responsible for the disappearance of Pastor Ricardo Alcaraz in Nuevo Laredo on September 15. He had not been released or found by year's end.

Jewish community representatives said they conducted an assessment of online anti-Semitic messages, symbols, and language from January through June, finding that Twitter accounted for 87.1 percent, news sources 8.5 percent, online forums 3.5 percent, and blogs 0.9 percent. The representatives said the number of anti-Semitic attacks was approximately the same as in 2018. Anti-Semitic tweets typically referenced the Holocaust and Hitler, along with other derogatory language.

On September 28, protesters advocating for the legalization of abortion set fire to the door of the Mexico City Metropolitan Cathedral. Parishioners gathered in front of the door to protect the building. According to press reports, individuals also caused property damage to businesses and city facilities during the demonstration.

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 killings of Catholic priests 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 highlight the importance of the issue and reinforce the U.S. government's commitment to religious freedom.

The embassy posted multiple times on social media using the hashtag #LibertadReligiosa (Freedom of Religion), including posts by the former ambassador on Rosh Hashannah, Hanukkah, and Virgen de Guadalupe holidays.

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