

CHILE 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship, and the law prohibits religious discrimination. Church and state are officially separate. The National Office of Religious Affairs (ONAR), a government agency within the executive office, is charged with facilitating communication between faith communities and the government, and ensuring that the rights of religious minorities are protected. In March ONAR created an Interfaith Advisory Council to further facilitate interreligious dialogue among faith-based leaders and between religious and government leaders.

Jewish community leaders reported acts of vandalism, including graffiti on Jewish community buildings. Much of the graffiti referenced frustration with policies of the State of Israel.

U.S. embassy representatives periodically met with government officials and religious leaders to discuss religious diversity and tolerance. In July the Charge d'Affaires hosted an interfaith iftar designed to promote interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.5 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2002 census (the most recent available,) 70 percent of the population over the age of 14 self-identifies as Roman Catholic and 15 percent identifies as “evangelical,” a term that refers to all non-Catholic Christian groups except The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Orthodox Churches (including the Armenian, Greek, Persian, Serbian, and Ukrainian communities), and Seventh-day Adventists. Bahais, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, and members of the Unification Church, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Orthodox Churches and Seventh-day Adventists together constitute less than 5 percent of the population. According to the ONAR, approximately 90 percent of those Chileans who identify as “evangelical” belong to Pentecostal movement Churches. Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Reformed Evangelical, and Wesleyan groups constitute the remaining 10 percent.

According to the census, 5 percent of the population self-identifies as indigenous, of whom 65 percent identify their faith community as Catholic, 29 percent as

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evangelical, and 6 percent as other, including adherents of traditional indigenous faith practices.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the free exercise of worship. These practices must not be “opposed to morals, to good customs or to the public order.” Religious groups may establish places of worship, as long as the locations abide by hygiene and security regulations.

According to the constitution, church and state are officially separate. The law prohibits religious discrimination. The ONAR is charged with promoting religious freedom and tolerance and ensuring respect for constitutional protections of religious freedom. The law provides civil legal remedies to victims of discrimination based on religion or belief and increases criminal penalties for acts of discriminatory violence.

The law does not require religious groups to register with the government; however, there are tax benefits available to those that register. Once registered, a religious group may then apply for recognition as a religious nonprofit organization. This differs from the nonprofit status for other nongovernmental organizations in that religious organizations have the option of adopting a charter and bylaws suited to a religious entity rather than a private corporation or a secular nonprofit.

There are currently more than 3,000 religious entities registered, the majority of which are small Pentecostal faith communities. By law, the Ministry of Justice may not refuse to accept the registration petition of a religious entity, although it may object to petitions within 90 days if legal prerequisites for registration are not satisfied.

Applicants for religious nonprofit status must present the Ministry of Justice with an authorized copy of their charter and corresponding bylaws with signatures and identification numbers of those who signed the charter. The bylaws must include the organization’s mission, creed, and structure. The charter needs to specify the signers, the name of the organization, and its physical address, and must include confirmation that bylaws have been approved. In the event the ministry raises

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objections to the group, the petitioner has 60 days to address objections the ministry raises or can challenge the ministry in court. Once registered, the state cannot dissolve a religious entity by decree. If concerns are raised, post-registration, about a religious group's activities, the semiautonomous Council for the Defense of the State may initiate a judicial review of the matter. The government has never deregistered a legally registered group. One registration per religious group is sufficient to apply to extend non-profit status to affiliates, either additional places of worship or schools, clubs, and sports organizations without registering them as separate entities. According to ONAR, the Ministry of Justice receives approximately 30 petitions monthly; the ministry has not objected to any petition and registered every group that completed the required paperwork.

Publicly subsidized schools must offer religious education for two teaching hours per week through high school. Local school administrators decide how religious education classes are structured. The majority of religious instruction in public schools is Roman Catholic, although the Ministry of Education approved instruction curricula designed by 14 other religious groups. Schools must provide religious instruction for students in the curriculum requested by their parents, and parents may have their children excused from religious education. Parents also have the right to homeschool their children for religious reasons or may enroll them in private, religiously-oriented schools.

The law grants religious groups the right to appoint chaplains to offer religious services in public hospitals, and prisons. Prisoners may request religious accommodation. Regulations for the armed forces and law enforcement agencies allow officially registered religious groups to appoint chaplains to serve in each branch of the armed forces, in the national uniformed police, and the national investigative police.

Government Practices

The Roman Catholic Church has a presence in public and some private schools, private hospitals, prisons, and the military. Representatives from ONAR regularly met with religious leaders to ensure that minority religious practices were respected in state institutions. Authorities continued to support the implementation of the requirement to provide non-Catholic religious education in public schools when requested by parents by engaging and supporting schools through municipal offices of religious affairs, encouraging the development of community-supported religious curricula, and providing religious diversity training to public servants.

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While prisons and military chaplains were predominately Roman Catholic, ONAR made an effort to counter perceptions of bias and support diversity in the chaplaincy by encouraging other faith communities to prepare and present candidates for these positions.

In March the ONAR created an Interfaith Advisory Council – a roundtable organization comprising religious leaders representing the country’s pluralistic religious communities, including Catholics, Evangelical Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Bahais, designed to further facilitate and enhance interreligious dialogue within the country by establishing standing meetings among religious leaders and offering government space to host those conversations. Authorities say the council is an innovation that formalizes existing ad hoc conversations between communities, and allows faith communities to engage with the government coherently.

The celebration of a Catholic Mass frequently marked public events, although the government continued efforts to include traditions from other faiths. Government officials attended Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim and other religious services and ceremonies to show official support for those communities.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Jewish community reported threats via social media and acts of vandalism (graffiti) on Jewish community buildings. Much of the social media commentary and graffiti appeared to have been motivated by disagreement with the policies of the State of Israel, and specifically referenced the crisis in Gaza, the construction of settlements in the West Bank, an Israeli policy that limited Palestinian access to the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem’s Old City, and the rights of the Palestinian people. In October the Israeli Ambassador to Chile, Rafi Eldad, told an Israeli newspaper that protests of Israeli policies organized by the Palestinian community in Chile sowed tension between the country’s Jewish and Palestinian communities and that he feared tensions could escalate to physical violence. In response, the Palestinian Federation of Chile requested on October 23 that Rafi Eldad, be declared persona non grata. In an open letter published on their website, the Federation stated that the protests the community organized to draw attention to the crisis in Gaza were not anti-Semitic but peaceful, legal and apt expressions of civil society in a democracy, and that it was inappropriate for Eldad to seek to curtail freedom of expression in Chile.

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In July the ambassador representing Palestine, Imad Nabil Jadaa Nabil, was recalled to Ramallah for consultations after a video showing him quoting from a controversial text, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, was translated and featured in an Israeli newspaper.

In August a group which calls themselves the Supporters for the Defense of Chile (Padechi), hung banners with reverse swastikas on a residential building in downtown Santiago. Jewish leaders immediately objected to the use of symbols as an incitement to hate, racism, and anti-Semitism, and an affront to the country's commitment to the universality of human rights. Government officials stated that the use of the symbols was "against the basic principles of the constitution," and called for a criminal investigation of the group. The owners of the residence promptly removed the banners.

The Catholic Church administered prominent private hospitals, schools, and social services organizations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with government officials and religious leaders to discuss institutional cooperation among government and religious organizations, interfaith dialogue among youth, and antidiscrimination legislation.

In April the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism visited Santiago and met with Jewish Community of Chile (CJCH) leaders the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, ONAR and academics to gain a better understanding of the challenges in combatting anti-Semitism in the country.

On July 7, the Charge d'Affaires hosted leaders of religious communities at an interfaith iftar. The event celebrated religious diversity and interfaith dialogue and emphasized religious tolerance.