

GUATEMALA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including freedom of worship and the free expression of all beliefs. The constitution recognizes the distinct legal personality of the Roman Catholic Church. Non-Catholic religious groups must register with the Ministry of Government to enter into contracts or receive tax-exempt status. Mayan spiritual leaders said the government continued to limit their access to some Mayan religious sites, including some located in national parks and in other protected areas where the government charges entrance fees. The Mayan community of Chicoyoguito raised concerns in September about continued lack of access to a spiritual site on former Guatemalan Military Base 21, which became a UN peacekeeping training base known as CREOMPAZ, in Coban, Alta Verapaz. Non-Catholic groups, including The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), stated some municipal-level authorities still discriminated against them in processing permit approvals and in local tax collection. In September the congress requested that migration authorities ban a rock band from performing in the country, stating the band's lyrics offended Christian values.

Some Catholic clergy continued to report threats and harassment against them because of their engagement in environmental protection. Some Mayan religious groups reported land owners continued to limit their access to Mayan religious sites on private property. Interfaith coordination and humanitarian efforts associated with this coordination increased during the year, including campaigns to assist survivors of the June 3 Fuego Volcano eruption, regardless of their religious affiliation.

The U.S. embassy regularly held meetings with government officials from the executive and legislative branches in addition to leaders of religious groups to discuss issues of religious freedom, including threats against Catholic clergy and the reported lack of access to Mayan spiritual sites. Embassy officials emphasized the value of tolerance and respect for religious diversity, including for religious minorities, in meetings with various civil society and religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 16.58 million (July 2018 estimate). According to a 2016 survey by ProDatos, approximately 45 percent of the population is Catholic and 42 percent Protestant. Approximately 11 percent of

the population professes no religious affiliation. Groups together constituting less than 3 percent of the population include Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and adherents of the Mayan, Xinca, and Afro-Indigenous Garifuna religions.

Christian groups include the Full Gospel Church, Assemblies of God, Central American Church, Prince of Peace Church, independent evangelical Protestant groups, Baptists, the Church of Jesus Christ, Episcopalians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Russian Orthodox, and Seventh-day Adventists.

Catholics and Protestants are present throughout the country, with adherents among all major ethnic groups. According to leaders of Mayan spiritual organizations, as well as Catholic and Protestant clergy, many indigenous Catholics and some indigenous Protestants practice some form of syncretism with indigenous spiritual rituals, mainly in the eastern city of Livingston and in the southern region of the country.

According to Jewish community leadership, approximately 1,000 Jews live in the country. Muslim leaders stated there are approximately 1,200 Muslims of mostly Palestinian origin, who reside primarily in Guatemala City. According to local Ahmadi Muslims, there is a small Ahmadi community of approximately 70 members.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including the free expression of all beliefs and the right to practice a religion or belief, in public and private. The constitution recognizes the distinct legal personality of the Catholic Church.

The constitution does not require religious groups to register for the purpose of worship, but non-Catholic religious groups must register for legal status to conduct activities such as renting or purchasing property and entering into contracts, and to receive tax-exempt status and tax exemptions for properties used for worship, religious education, and social assistance. To register, a group must file with the Ministry of Government a copy of its bylaws, which must reflect an intention to pursue religious objectives, and a list of its initial membership, with at least 25 members. The ministry may reject applications if the group does not appear to be devoted to a religious objective, appears intent on undertaking illegal activities, or engages in activities that appear likely to threaten public order. All religious

groups must obtain the permission of the respective municipal authorities for construction and repair of properties and for holding public events, consistent with requirements for nonreligious endeavors.

The constitution protects the rights of indigenous groups to practice their traditions and forms of cultural expression, including religious rites. The law permits Mayan spiritual groups to conduct religious ceremonies at Mayan historical sites on government-owned property.

The criminal code penalizes with one-month to one-year sentences the interruption of religious celebrations, the offense of a religion, and the desecration of burial sites or human remains; however, charges are seldom filed under these laws. The constitution provides for freedom of expression, protecting against blasphemy.

According to the constitution, no member of the clergy of any religion may serve as president, vice president, government minister, or judge.

A Catholic priest and a nondenominational Christian pastor serve as prison chaplains.

The constitution permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools. There is no national framework for determining the nature or content of religious instruction. In general, public schools have no religious component in the curriculum. Private religious schools are allowed and can be found in all areas of the country.

The government requires foreign missionaries to obtain tourist visas, which authorities issue for renewable periods of three months. After renewing their tourist visas once, foreign missionaries may apply for temporary residence for up to two years.

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

Government Practices

Some Mayan leaders said the government continued to limit their access to a number of religious sites on government-owned property and to require them to pay to access the sites. The government continued to state there were no limitations to access; however, anyone seeking access to the sites located on national parks or other protected areas had to pay processing or entrance fees. In

Semuc Champey, a natural monument, for example, the processing fee was approximately \$4 to \$5, a prohibitive price for many indigenous populations. Leaders from the Committee on the Designation of Sacred Sites continued to state practitioners of Mayan spirituality were generally able to obtain free access to sites if they were accredited and issued an identification card as spiritual guides and had received written permission from the Ministry of Culture in advance of the scheduled ceremony/religious practice. Mayan leaders said the government continued to require written permission, involving considerable paperwork, costly travel to the capital, and fluency in Spanish. The Presidential Commission against Discrimination and Racism (CODISRA) continued to provide interpreters for indigenous persons upon request. Mayan advocates continued to press for access, within reasonable parameters, to the approximately 2,000 sacred sites on both public and private land.

In September the Mayan community of Chicoyoguito expressed concerns about lack of access to a spiritual site on former Guatemalan Military Base 21, which was transformed into a UN peacekeeping training base known as CREOMPAZ in Coban, Alta Verapaz. The community stated it continued to petition for the return of land, including its sacred ceremonial center. In 1968 military forces seized the land and evicted members of the Mayan community.

On November 5, with a search warrant from the Solicitor General's Office (PGN), National Civilian Police officers and investigators, along with a PGN attorney, conducted a partial search of the compound of an ultraorthodox Jewish group, Lev Tahor, located in Santa Rosa. Some government officials stated allegations of child abuse, including child marriage, surrounded the group.

Non-Catholic groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ, said some municipal-level authorities still discriminated against them in processing permit approvals and in local tax collection. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ said in spite of a 2013 ruling exempting the Church from paying taxes, municipal authorities continued to link the issue of tax collection to construction permits, refusing to issue new permits unless the Church paid its taxes.

Missionaries continued reporting they chose to remain on tourist visas to avoid what they considered a complicated procedure to apply for temporary residence.

On September 26, congress approved a resolution instructing migration authorities to ban a heavy metal rock band from performing a concert, stating the band was satanic and its lyrics were tantamount to an attack on Christian values. The human

rights ombudsman criticized the decision, noting the constitution protects freedom of religion and thought. Some local media sources stated the decision amounted to religious censorship.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Some Catholic clergy continued to report threats and harassment against them because of their association with environmental protection work. Some private owners of land in locations considered sacred by Mayan religious groups denied access to Mayans, including caves, lagoons, mountains, and forests, according to Mayan spiritual groups.

Members of the Catholic Episcopal Conference said they were offended by a March 8 protest for women's rights they believed mocked Christian religious traditions and imagery. Other religious leaders said they were not offended because the march was in honor of human rights and equality.

Christian communities, including the Church of Jesus Christ, as well as the Jewish and Muslim communities, reported increased interfaith collaboration during the year, including providing humanitarian assistance following the June 3 Fuego volcanic eruption; creating an Interreligious Humanitarian Commission, which during the year provided eye examinations and glasses to more than 9,000 persons; and combating high rates of malnutrition among the country's youth. These groups provided health and humanitarian assistance to individuals irrespective of their religious beliefs.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials regularly met with the human rights ombudsman, CODISRA, and members of congress to discuss religious freedom issues, including threats against Catholic clergy and the reported lack of access for Mayans to their spiritual sites. The embassy continued to promote increased engagement between the government and indigenous communities, including regarding the CREOMPAZ base issue.

Embassy officials met with leaders of major religious groups and representatives of faith-based nongovernmental organizations to discuss the importance of tolerance and respect for religious minorities. Embassy officials continued outreach to religious leader and entities, including the Catholic archbishop's offices; the Evangelical Alliance (the largest organization of Protestant churches, representing

more than 30,000 individual churches); the Jewish community; the Muslim community; and representatives from the Commission for the Designation of Sacred Places for the Maya, Xinca, and Garifuna communities, to strengthen understanding of religious freedom issues.