

PARAGUAY 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution accords individuals the right to choose, change, and freely practices their religion and prohibits religious discrimination. It specifically recognizes the right of indigenous communities to express their religion freely. The constitution states the relationship between the state and the Roman Catholic Church is based on independence, cooperation, and autonomy. The constitution does not address relations between the state and other religious groups. Representatives of the Catholic Christian Apostolic National Church of Paraguay (ICCAN) said that in October the Vice Ministry of Worship (VMW) rejected its second request during the year to register as a religious entity. ICCAN representatives said they believed the Roman Catholic Church had “blocked” ICCAN’s request because the Catholic Church claimed exclusive use of the word “catholic” in a church title. Roman Catholic Church representatives responded that they believed ICCAN leaders’ claims of apostolic succession from the historical National Catholic Church were dubious and they perceived any registration issues to be a result of issues inherent in ICCAN. Religious groups not affiliated with the Catholic Church said the government disproportionately supported and subsidized teacher salaries at Catholic schools.

Catholic, Protestant, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and Jewish representatives initiated an interreligious dialogue, including participation at a VMW-organized symposium on family in August to advocate for the creation of a new Ministry of Family.

U.S. embassy representatives met with the vice minister of culture at the VMW and discussed challenges ICCAN and some other religious groups faced with registration, the processing of claims of religious discrimination, and the unequal provision of state funding for salaries at schools run by religious groups. Embassy officials met with representatives of the Catholic, Mennonite, Catholic Christian Apostolic, and Jewish communities to discuss interfaith respect for religious diversity and hear their views on the status of religious freedom in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.0 million (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2002 national census, the most recent survey reporting religious affiliation, 90 percent of the population is Roman Catholic (a 2014

Latinobarometro report estimated 88 percent is Roman Catholic) and 6 percent evangelical Protestant. Groups that together constitute 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), and adherents of indigenous tribal beliefs. Members of the Mennonite Church, whom Church leaders estimated to be between 30,000 and 46,000, are prominent in the remote areas of the central Chaco and some eastern regions of the country. ICCAN estimated its membership at more than 100,000.

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 Catholic Church is based on "independence, cooperation, and autonomy." The Catholic Church, however, must comply with all regulations the state imposes on other churches and non-Christian 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 constitution does not address relations between the state and other religious groups.

A 2017 presidential decree requires all religious and philosophical groups to register with the VMW and submit annual reports stating the organization's key leadership and functions. Prior to the 2017 decree, registration was mandatory only for religious organizations requesting exemption from value-added taxes and other government fees. Organizations must submit 12 documents to the VMW to register. 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. Among other requirements, religious groups must demonstrate legal status as a nonprofit organization and agree to annual recertification. Religious leaders must submit to financial and criminal background checks. According to the VMW, 536 religious groups have active registrations with the government, including 24 new groups registered during the year.

The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools. The constitution provides private schools the right to offer religious education, with the only requirements for staff being merit and ethical integrity. Registration for private religious schools is not mandatory, but the Ministry of Education and Culture recognizes only degrees granted by registered institutions. Additionally, only registered schools with nonprofit status may receive subsidies for teachers' salaries. Students of religions other than the one associated with a private religious school may enroll; however, all students are expected to participate in the 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.

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

Government Practices

The VMW instituted a grace period through the end of 2018 for all religious and philosophical groups to complete the mandatory registration process and did not impose penalties or monetary sanctions on groups that had not registered. The ministry stated, however, that it would require full compliance by 2019. The VMW stated that it was implementing the registration law consistently across religious groups and once it received all 12 documents from a religious group, it would complete the process in 15 days.

In October the VMW rejected ICCAN's second request for registration as an official religious entity, citing a presidential decree stating religious entities with denominations that could be confused with already registered denominations could not register. ICCAN representatives stated they had attempted to register starting in 2011 but had documentation of registration requests only from the current year. ICCAN sources restated their belief that the Catholic Church had pressured the government not to register the ICCAN because the Roman Catholic Church claimed exclusive use of the word "catholic" in a church title. Roman Catholic

Church representatives responded that ICCAN's difficulties obtaining registration were due to questions regarding ICCAN's legitimacy as a religious organization. Catholic Church representatives said other religious groups had the same position on ICCAN. ICCAN representatives also said the government continued not to recognize their claim to land and property they said the Catholic Church had taken from them in 1840.

The Ministry of Education and Culture continued to subsidize the salaries of hundreds of teachers in registered, nonprofit schools operated by predominantly Catholic religious groups. Some non-Catholic religious groups, including the Jewish and Mennonite communities, continued to state the government disproportionately supported Catholic schools and did not pay a commensurate number of teachers in registered, non-Catholic religious schools. According to a ministry representative, they maintained an agreement with the 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 vulnerable student populations, and providing educational or scholarship services to vulnerable students. Mennonite schools in Boqueron Department have also established an ad hoc consultation process with departmental authorities.

The VMW reported that 550 foreign missionaries registered or reregistered during the year, most of them members of the Church of Jesus Christ.

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 religious groups to operate and provide services of different religions within prisons for adults, women, and youth; however, during the year only Christian groups made use of this option.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On September 17, a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) filed a complaint with the Public Prosecutor's Office based on a video posted online showing an evangelical Christian pastor "exorcising" an elderly indigenous religious leader in the Mbya indigenous community of Caaguazu Department. According to media reports, the pastor belonged to the Pentecostal Church Prince of Peace, an

unregistered church. The Prosecutor's Office launched an investigation of the incident in September, which continued at year's end.

Observers, including from NGOs, political pundits, and the press, stated the Catholic Church continued to maintain an influential role within society and government that gave it advantage over other religious groups in the country. ICCAN representatives said this influence enabled the Catholic Church to block ICCAN registration requests and to secure more subsidies for Catholic schools than other religious schools received.

Human rights organizations continued to state that Mennonite employers did not respect indigenous religious holidays.

Representatives of the local Jewish community said there was a new group espousing Nazi ideology forming in the country; however, they said security forces had responded to the concerns of the Jewish community.

Catholic, Church of Jesus Christ, and Protestant groups started collaborating on issues of family and social justice, participating in a VMW-organized symposium on family in August to advocate for the creation of a new Ministry of Family. Christian and Jewish groups began an interreligious dialogue among religious group representatives. According to Catholic representatives, the dialogue did not include Muslim participation because they said Muslim leaders and the small Muslim community were not very active, although they stated dialogue participants had no objection to Muslim participation.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with Vice Minister Herminio Lobos at the VMW to discuss problems the ICCAN and some other religious groups faced with registration, difficulties in processing claims of religious discrimination, and the unequal provision of state funding for salaries at schools run by religious groups.

Embassy officials met with Catholic, Mennonite, Catholic Christian Apostolic, and Jewish leaders and discussed religious discrimination and the government's attitude towards their constituencies.