

# MEXICO 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution guarantees all persons religious freedom, including the right to engage in religious ceremonies and acts of worship. Under the constitution, indigenous communities enjoy a protected legal structure allowing them to practice their own particular “uses and customs.” The General Directorate for Religious Associations (DGAR) within the Interior Ministry (SEGOB) continued to work with state and local officials on criminal investigations involving religious groups. During the year, DGAR investigated 11 cases related to religious freedom at the federal level, compared with six in 2017. Government officials stated a continued wave of killings and attacks on Catholic priests reflected high levels of generalized criminal violence throughout the country rather than targeting for religious beliefs. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), however, said criminal groups targeted Catholic priests because communities viewed them as moral authority figures. NGOs said criminal groups sought to remove these moral authority figures so communities would more likely overlook organized crime activities. According to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), in March community authorities in San Miguel Chiptic, Chiapas State, threatened three indigenous families for converting from Catholicism to the Seventh-day Adventist Church and later did significant damage to three of their properties. Members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church sought assistance from municipal and state authorities, who declined to intervene, according to CSW. On May 23, local police in San Miguel Chiptic arrested two Seventh-day Adventist men for preaching beliefs other than Catholicism. At year’s end, six families remained displaced and sheltered with other Seventh-day Adventist Church members in Chiapas. Evangelical Protestant leaders continued to state local indigenous leaders pressured some evangelical Protestants in mainly rural and/or indigenous areas in the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca to support financially and/or participate in Catholic cultural and religious events, and in some cases convert or return to Catholicism. In September CSW reported representatives from Rancheria Yocnajib, located in the Comitan de Dominguez municipality of Chiapas, did not allow the burial of an evangelical Protestant in the community public cemetery because she had not participated in Catholic religious festivals.

The Catholic Multimedia Center (CMC) reported criminal groups continued targeting priests and other religious leaders in some parts of the country, which included killings, kidnappings, death threats, and extortion. The CMC reported unidentified individuals killed seven priests and kidnapped another during the year,

and in August asserted Mexico was the most violent country for priests in Latin America for the 10th year in a row. In March unidentified individuals detonated two homemade bombs in two Catholic churches in Matamoros, Tamaulipas. CSW reported unidentified individuals killed four non-Catholic clergy.

U.S. embassy and consulate officials met with government counterparts 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.

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

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 126 million (July 2018 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 and Muslims. More than 2 percent of the population reports practicing a religion not otherwise specified, and nearly 5 percent reports 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 identify themselves as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the 2010 census. Church 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 self-identify 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. Nearly half of the country's approximately 4,000 Muslims are concentrated in Mexico City and the state of Mexico. There is also an Ahmadi Muslim population of several hundred living in Chiapas, most of whom are converts and of ethnic Tzotzil Maya origin. There are also small indigenous communities of Baha'i that

number in the hundreds. An estimated half of the 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 have or adopt the religion of their choosing, or not to have 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. Philosophical freedoms of conscience and religion have 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 will be subject to regulatory law, which requires a permit to do so.

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.

To operate, religious groups are not required to register with the government. Registration is only required with DGAR 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 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.

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. If mediation fails, the parties may submit the issue to DGAR for binding arbitration or seek judicial redress. Each of the 32 states has offices with responsibility for religious affairs. The National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) is an autonomous federal agency responsible for ensuring nondiscrimination and equal opportunity, including for minority religious groups.

As of September 28, there were 9,146 religious associations registered by DGAR, an increase from the 8,908 groups registered in 2017. Registered groups included 9,106 Christian (an increase of 237 from 2017), 13 Buddhist, 10 Jewish, two Hindu, three Islamic, and two International Society for Krishna Consciousness groups. Baha'is and Ahmadi Muslims remain unregistered.

The constitution states acts of public worship are to be performed inside places of worship. Active clergy may not hold public office, advocate partisan political views, support political candidates, or publicly oppose the laws or institutions of the state.

The law guarantees prisoners dignified and equal treatment from prison staff without distinction based on religious preferences.

Religious groups must apply for permits to construct new buildings or convert existing buildings into houses of worship. Any religious building constructed after January 27, 1992, is the property of the religious group that built it and is subject to the relevant taxes. All religious buildings erected before then are considered part of the national patrimony and owned by the state.

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 law states religious groups may not own or operate radio or television stations. Government permission is required for commercial radio or television to transmit religious programming.

The constitution grants indigenous communities the right to autonomy to “decide their internal forms of coexistence” and permits them to maintain separate legal systems for the resolution of conflicts within their communities. The constitution also protects the right of indigenous leaders to practice their own particular 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. The country claims the following constitutional limitations to the covenant: a limitation (to Article 18) that religious acts must be performed in places of worship unless granted prior permission and a reservation (to Article 25) that religious ministers have neither a passive vote nor the right to form political associations.

### **Government Practices**

According to CSW, community authorities in the indigenous community of San Miguel Chiptic, Chiapas, threatened three families on March 4 for converting from Catholicism to the Seventh-day Adventist faith, telling them if they did not renounce their faith, authorities would destroy their houses and expel them from the community. On March 15, indigenous community members destroyed three buildings, toppling cement blocks that damaged all of the furniture and appliances inside the residences. Members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church sought assistance from municipal and state authorities, who, according to CSW, declined to intervene because of the constitution’s legal authorities granted to the indigenous community leadership. On May 23, local indigenous authorities arrested two Seventh-day Adventist men for preaching beliefs differing from the community’s traditional Catholicism. At year’s end, six families remained displaced and sheltered with other Church members in the municipality of Ocosingo, Chiapas. Some Protestant groups continued to request the government amend the constitution or laws to permit a more vigorous governmental response to reports of abuse and discrimination in indigenous communities.

DGAR continued to work with state and local officials on criminal investigations involving religious groups, primarily evangelical Protestants. DGAR investigated

11 cases related to religious freedom at the federal level during the year, compared with six in 2017. Four of these cases occurred in the state of Oaxaca, three in Hidalgo, and one each in Puebla and Chiapas. According to DGAR, most incidents of religious discrimination should have been filed with the state government, as the federal government lacked jurisdiction. Municipal and state officials commonly mediated disputes among religious groups. Some groups said officials rarely pursued legal punishments against offending local leaders, preferring instead to reach informal mediated solutions. The groups said there were insufficient resources devoted to federal and state agencies that work on religious freedom.

According to CSW, local indigenous authorities in the indigenous community of Rancho Nuevo, Hidalgo, illegally detained five members of the Christ Is Coming Protestant Church. Unidentified individuals reportedly removed four men from a church service on March 3, tied them up, and held them until just after noon on the following day. A fifth victim was taken from his home on the following day and held with the others. The unidentified individuals reportedly beat them and forced them to pay a fine for their “religious beliefs.”

NGOs and some religious organizations continued to state that a number of rural and indigenous communities expected inhabitants, regardless of their faith, to participate in and fund traditional community religious gatherings, and in some cases adhere to the majority religion.

According to media reports, in March local authorities expelled three evangelical Protestant families from their indigenous community in Altamirano, Chiapas, for practicing a religion other than Catholicism. According to the reports, the children in these families were not allowed to return to school, the adults could not return to work, and the community leaders destroyed their homes with all their belongings still inside. The municipal government had not responded to complaints from the families by year’s end.

According to the NGO Impulso 18, the indigenous community authority in Coamila, Hidalgo, closed a small school of 16 students in August because the students’ parents were evangelical Protestants who refused to let their children participate in local festivities that violated their religious beliefs. The families filed a complaint with DGAR. The Hidalgo State Commission of Human Rights opened a complaint on behalf of the students. On September 25, state education authorities stated the students were welcome to attend and reopen the school and said many parents decided to keep their children out of school because of social

tensions arising from their refusal to contribute to community festivals associated with Catholic holidays.

Evangelical Protestants again cited cases in which those refusing to participate in Catholic festivities, or in some cases to convert to Catholicism, faced forcible displacement from their communities, experienced arbitrary detention by local authorities, or had property destroyed by community leaders. In September CSW reported representatives from Rancheria Yocnajib, located in the Comitán de Domínguez municipality of Chiapas, did not allow the burial of an evangelical Protestant in the community public cemetery because she had not participated in Catholic religious festivals and the local indigenous community restricted the cemetery's use to Catholic burials.

On August 15, the Supreme Court ruled a child in Chihuahua with leukemia must be given blood transfusions despite the parents' religious objections due to their religious beliefs as Jehovah's Witnesses. After receiving input from doctors and the parents, state officials took custody of the girl to provide proper medical attention, including transfusions. The Supreme Court later ruled in favor of the state's actions to protect the life of the child.

According to DGAR, the federal government continued to promote dialogue with religious actors with the stated goal to ensure the exercise of religious freedom and help resolve conflicts involving religious intolerance. Between 2011 and 2017, CONAPRED reported 67 complaints of alleged acts of religious discrimination, and another five filed in 2018. In July a Tijuana hospital refused to perform surgery on a Jehovah's Witness because of his religious objection to receiving blood transfusions if required, a hospital requirement for the procedure he requested.

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

According to the CMC, on February 4, unidentified individuals killed two Catholic priests, Germain Muniz Garcia and Ivan Anorve Jimenez, on a highway between Iguala and Taxco in the state of Guerrero. Investigators initially stated the motive of the assassination was Muniz Garcia's alleged ties with organized crime. Investigators said they made this assumption because Muniz Garcia was pictured holding an assault rifle with alleged gang members. The investigation of the killings continued at year's end. According to the CMC, four nuns fled Chilpancingo Chilapa, Guerrero, where Muniz Garcia and Anorve Jimenez

worked, following the killings and after one nun's sibling was the subject of targeted violence on January 30.

According to the CMC, on April 3, unidentified individuals kidnapped Catholic priest Jose Moises Fabila Reyes in Cuernavaca, Morelos. Despite the family paying a ransom of two million pesos (\$106,000), the family discovered his body on April 25, dead of an apparent heart attack during his captivity. The investigation of the case continued at year's end.

According to the CMC, on April 9, unidentified individuals shot and killed evangelical Protestant pastor Eduardo "Lalo" Garcia in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. According to the CMC, Garcia's family had long been a target of criminal groups. In 2009 his son was killed for not paying a protection extortion, and his daughter was kidnapped in 2011. The investigation continued at year's end.

According to the CMC, on April 18, unidentified individuals stabbed and killed Catholic priest Ruben Alcantara Diaz inside his church in Cuatitlan Izacalli, Mexico State. State officials described the attack as a personal dispute. The investigation of the case continued at year's end.

According to the CMC, on April 20, two individuals shot and killed Catholic priest Juan Miguel Contreras Garcia in Tlajomulco de Zuniga, Jalisco. The investigation of the case continued at year's end.

According to CSW, on July 23, two men shot and killed evangelical Protestant pastor Noe Plaza Rico in a tire repair shop in Cortazar, Guanajuato. The armed men fled. The investigation of the case continued at year's end.

According to the CMC, on August 25, the body of Catholic priest Miguel Gerardo Flores Hernandez was found in Mugica, Michoacan. Authorities stated that the motive for his killing was unknown. The Michoacan Attorney General's Office detained the alleged killer on August 29.

According to media reports, on October 14, the body of Catholic priest Icaro Arturo Orta was found three days after he disappeared. The investigation of the case continued at year's end.

According to the CMC, on January 14, a knife attack at a Catholic church in Ecatepec de Morelos, Mexico State, left one dead and four injured. The CMC



reported police captured the alleged aggressor and said the case was in the hands of State of Mexico prosecutors.

According to NGOs and media reports, Catholic priests and other religious leaders continued to be targeted and were the victims of killings, extortion attempts, death threats, kidnappings, and intimidation by organized-crime groups. Federal government officials and Catholic Church authorities stated these incidents were not a result of targeting for religious beliefs but rather incidents related to overall crime. NGOs believed some criminals targeted Catholic priests because communities viewed them as moral authority figures.

The CMC reported the most dangerous states for priests were Mexico City, Guerrero, Veracruz, and Michoacan. The CMC reported unidentified individuals killed seven priests and kidnapped another during the year. The CMC identified Mexico as the most violent country for priests in Latin America for the 10th year in a row.

According to the CMC, unidentified individuals detonated homemade explosives at Catholic churches in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, on March 1 and March 4. The first bomb exploded in the Diocese Cathedral of Matamoros. The second bomb exploded in San Antonio de Padua Church. No one was hurt in the attacks. The investigation of the case continued at year's end.

Jewish community representatives stated no anti-Semitic acts occurred during the year, compared with very rare occurrences in 2017.

In Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, civil society and private-sector organizers of local nativity procession events (*posadas*) during the Christmas holiday emphasized that all were welcome, regardless of religious affiliation.

Religions for Peace, an interreligious working group, continued to be active in the country. 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 of Latter-day Saints.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

U.S. embassy and consulate representatives met with government officials responsible for religious and indigenous affairs at both the federal and state levels.

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 embassy posted multiple times on social media using the hashtag #LibertadReligiosa (Freedom of Religion), including posts by the former Ambassador on Rosh HaShannah and for the 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, the CMC, CSW, and Impulso 18, to discuss the safety of religious workers working on humanitarian issues, assess the status of religious freedom, and express support for religious tolerance.