

KEY FINDINGS

During the past year, reports continued that Mexican authorities in several states pressured followers of minority religions to convert to and/or practice the majority religion of the particular area and participate in affiliated ceremonies and activities. Religious minorities who refused were forcibly displaced, arbitrarily detained, had their properties destroyed, and/or had their utilities cut off. Mexican state and federal authorities frequently failed to intervene in these cases, creating a climate of impunity. Mexico's constitutional and legal system protects freedom of religion or belief, but a constitutional guarantee of autonomy, including in religious beliefs, to indigenous communities is interpreted to favor an area's

BACKGROUND

Mexico's population of 122 million is approximately 83 percent Roman Catholic. Religious minority populations include Evangelical Protestants, 5 percent; Pentecostals, 2 percent; Jehovah's Witnesses, 1 percent; and other religious communities, 9 percent. Mexico's indigenous population of 12 million is concentrated in the southern and south-central regions of the country.

The State Department, religious freedom activists, and human rights organizations report that impunity for religious freedom and other human rights abuses is a serious problem throughout the country and that the Mexican justice system reports low rates of prosecution.

Constitutional Provisions and Legal Protections

The Mexican constitution and legal system guarantee freedom of religion or belief to all citizens. Article 24 of the constitution states, "Everyone is free to embrace the religion of his choice and practice all ceremonies, devotions, or observances of his respective faith, either in places of public worship or at home, provided they do not constitute an offense punishable by law." In 2011, the Mexican government amended the constitution to elevate international human rights treaties to the same level as the constitution. The Law on Religious Associations and Public Worship protects the rights to hold or to adopt the religious beliefs of one's choosing and to practice the acts of worship or rites according to one's preference, individually or collectively; prohibits discrimination, coercion, or hostility

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT

The U.S. government should continue to raise concerns about the status of freedom of religion or belief with Mexican federal and state officials. The State Department should support Mexican religious freedom and human rights organizations to document religious freedom violations, as well as train Mexican authorities on international and Mexican standards for freedom of religion or belief

religious majority. These religious freedom violations occur in the context of Mexico's long history of challenges in balancing religion and state.

because of one's religious beliefs; and bans mandatory professions of religious beliefs, participation in religious activities, or support for religious communities. In 2016, Mexico's Congress of the Union amended Federal Penal Code article 149 to criminalize religious discrimination, including the denial of communal services, displacement, or the deprivation of property based on religious identity, punishable by imprisonment for one to three years.

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However, government officials in some states use article 2 of the Mexican constitution, the Law on Uses and Customs, to infringe on the rights of religious minorities in different municipalities. The Law on Uses and Customs affirms that Mexico is a "pluri-ethnic" nation and affords a number of rights to its indigenous peoples, including the rights to implement their own social, economic, political, and cultural organization and to maintain and enrich their language and culture, in accordance with Mexican constitutional law and human rights protections. In interpreting and implementing this law, several local state authorities identify

the indigenous community as the majority religious community in that area, and work to enforce that community's ceremonies and activities. As a result, the Law of Uses and Customs' application in several states has led to local conflicts, primarily between Roman Catholic leaders and followers of other religions (see below).

Attacks on Religious Minorities

The official application of the Law on Uses and Customs results in religious freedom violations directed against religious minorities in different municipalities of Chiapas, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Jalisco, Oaxaca, and Puebla states, where many predominantly indigenous communities reside. In most cases, municipalities interpret Roman Catholicism as the majority indigenous culture to be protected, and local

authorities—including some Catholic leaders—have persecuted those who refuse to convert, pay taxes for Catholic events and operations, or participate in Catholic religious activities. There also are cases in which predominantly Protestant municipalities

have engaged in religious freedom violations against Catholics and/or other Protestants. In these areas, religious minorities who do not wish to participate in or contribute financially to religious festivals, or who wish to practice a different faith or no faith, have experienced violence, forced displacement, arbitrary detention, and destruction of personal property and houses of worship. Other retaliatory actions include cutting off water and electricity, prohibiting burials in community cemeteries, denying children access to schools, barring participation in political and civic community activity, and denying employment.

Religious freedom advocacy organizations report that countrywide, Mexican state governments have not resolved approximately 150 cases of religious freedom violations; case sizes range from one person to more than 100 people. According to its 2016 report, the Mexican National Human Rights Commission is seeing an increase in the number of religious freedom cases

it reviews related to the application of the Law on Uses and Customs. It also reports there are currently 35,000 persons displaced because of these violations.

Local government religious affairs offices and rule of law institutions fail to hold accountable government officials or members of society who engaged in acts of violence, displacement, harassment, or discrimination against religious minorities. In the few cases of government intervention and mediation, officials fail to follow up to ensure settlements are implemented.

In the first half of 2016, there were several reports of religious freedom violations, primarily in Chiapas. On January 4, 2016, authorities destroyed properties of and forcibly expelled nine families belonging to the Renovation in Christ church in Chiapas. On January

29, authorities forcibly expelled under threat of lynching 20 Baptist families in Jalisco. In February, a Protestant church in Chiapas was torched. On April 24, officials cut off the water of five evangelical families in Chiapas. In May, state officials forcefully expelled 86 Protestant families and

cut off the water and electricity of 15 other Protestant families in Chiapas. In June, a Protestant family in Chiapas who refused to contribute financially to Catholic festivals was imprisoned and fined, and a son was beaten before they fled.

Criminal Gang Targeting of Catholic Priests

Organized criminal gangs, such as Los Zetas and Knights Templar, continue to target Catholic priests and other religious leaders with death threats, extortion, and intimidation; in some cases, these targets ultimately are killed. For instance, in one week in September 2016, three priests were found dead: Fathers Alejo Nabor Jimenez Juarez, Jose Alfredo Suarez de la Cruz, and Jose Alfredo Lopez Guillen. Religious leaders are targeted because they speak out against the gangs and/or because they refuse to include gang spiritual mythology in their sermons.

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