

HONDURAS 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions. The government officially recognizes only the Roman Catholic Church, classifying other religious groups as religious associations with fewer rights and privileges than the Catholic Church. Non-Catholic religious groups criticized what they said was the inequality in recognition and treatment among churches: They cited the government's income tax levy on the salaries of non-Catholic clergy and taxes on religious materials received from abroad, as examples. The Catholic Church and other religious groups criticized the government's unwillingness to recognize religious weddings performed without a civil marriage certificate. Seventh-day Adventists said educational institutions and private sector places of employment sometimes failed to respect their observance of the Sabbath on Saturdays. Jehovah's Witnesses said certain educational institutions required them to participate in patriotic activities contrary to their faith and some government medical facilities refused to treat them because of their rejection of blood transfusions. Some Muslims reported government and private sector offices denied the right for women to wear the hijab. The government worked with religious groups to address their concerns about church registration and to facilitate missionaries' residency status; the government had agreements with some religious groups to facilitate visas for missionaries. The government created a separate intake process for registering religious groups.

Some sectors of society criticized perceived political activism and close ties between the government and particular religious groups. Religious groups stated some media reported incorrect and inflammatory information about the activities of religious leaders. Unknown individuals attacked the security detail of a prominent religious leader in December, killing one of his military police bodyguards. Reports suggested, however, the leader and his guards were targeted for his participation on a government-sponsored anticorruption commission, rather than for his religious work.

The U.S. funded a project with the Ministry of Governance to improve registration processes for civil society organizations, including creating an on-line application and renewal process aimed at reducing the burden for NGOs, including religious organizations, to register and file required reports. U.S. embassy officials maintained a dialogue with religious leaders and organizations, which included discussions of the unequal treatment of religious groups. The failure of the

religious registration law to afford all religious groups the same rights and privileges as the Catholic Church was a prominent topic.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 8.9 million (July 2016 estimate). The principal religious groups are Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants. The Catholic Church states it has approximately 6.85 million adherents, constituting 77 percent of the population. The Evangelical Fellowship of Honduras (CEH) points to a 2016 survey by a local marketing research and public opinion company that reported 48 percent of respondents self-identified as evangelical Protestants, 41 percent as Catholics, 3 percent as other, and 8 percent as unaffiliated with any religious organization.

In the 2015 Latinobarometro regional public opinion survey, 43.6 percent of respondents identified as Catholic, 42.1 percent as evangelical, 1.8 percent as other, and 12.4 percent as unaffiliated. Other religious groups with their stated number of adherents include Seventh-day Adventist (172,000); The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (165,000); Jehovah's Witnesses (22,000); and a variety of Anabaptist/Mennonite groups (18,000). Additionally, there are small communities of Episcopalians, Lutherans, Orthodox Christians, and Bahais. The most prominent evangelical Protestant churches include Church of God, Assemblies of God, Abundant Life Church, Living Love Church, International Christian Center, and various Great Commission churches. A growing number of evangelical Protestant churches have no denominational affiliation. The Moravian Church has a broad presence in the La Mosquitia region in the eastern part of the country. Some indigenous groups and African Hondurans practice African and Amerindian faiths or incorporate elements of Christianity, African, and Amerindian religions into syncretistic religious practices and beliefs.

The Muslim community reported they have 1,500 members and the Jewish community said they had several hundred members.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions as long as that exercise does not contravene other laws or public order. Religious leaders are prohibited from holding public office or making political statements.

The law distinguishes among legally recognized religious organizations, religious organizations registered as NGOs, and nonregistered religious organizations. The government does not require religious groups to register. By law, only the legislature has the authority to confer status as a legally recognized group; only the Catholic Church has received such recognition. Those recognized by law receive benefits such as tax exempt status for staff salaries and church materials.

Religious organizations not individually recognized by law may register as NGOs. The government does not significantly distinguish between religious and nonreligious NGOs. To register as an NGO, organizations must have a board of directors and juridical personality. Associations seeking juridical personality must submit an application to the Secretariat of State for Human Rights, Justice, Governance, and Decentralization describing their internal organization, bylaws, and goals. The Office of the Solicitor General reviews applications for juridical personality and renders a constitutional opinion. Approved organizations must submit annual financial and activity reports to the government. They may apply to the Ministry of Finance to receive benefits such as tax exemptions and customs duty waivers.

Unregistered religious organizations are allowed to operate but are unable to obtain tax-exempt status or other benefits.

The constitution states public education is secular and allows for the establishment of private schools. Parents have the right to choose the education their children receive, including religious education. The government dictates a minimum standardized curriculum for all schools.

The government requires foreign missionaries to obtain entry and residence permits, and mandates a local institution or individual sponsor a missionary's application for residency and submit it to immigration authorities. The government has agreements with members of the Evangelical Fellowship of Honduras (CEH), the Mormons, and the Seventh-day Adventists, among others, to facilitate entry and residence permits for their missionaries. Groups with whom the government does not have written agreements are required to provide proof of employment and income for their missionaries.

Foreign religious workers can request residency for up to five years. To renew their residence permits, religious workers must submit proof of continued employment with the sponsoring church at least 30 days before their residency expires. The law prohibits the immigration of foreign missionaries who practice

religions saying they use witchcraft or satanic rituals, and allows the deportation of foreigners who practice witchcraft or “religious fraud.” According to the immigration law, individuals who “fraudulently exercise their [religious] profession or office, or commit fraud against the health or religious beliefs of citizens of the country, or the national patrimony,” may be fined or face other legal consequences.

The criminal code protects clergy authorized to operate in the country from being forced to testify about privileged information obtained in confidence during a religious confession. Vicars, bishops, and archbishops of the Catholic Church and comparably ranked individuals from other legally recognized religious groups are not required to appear in court if subpoenaed. They are required, however, to make a statement at a location of their choosing.

Religious officials face fines of 50,000-100,000 lempiras (\$2,100 - \$4,300) and legal bans on performing religious duties for four to six years if they perform a religious marriage without a civil marriage license.

The government is a party to the Ibero-American Convention on Young People’s Rights, which recognizes the right to conscientious objection to obligatory military service.

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

Government Practices

The government continued to identify legally the Catholic Church as the only recognized church, and to classify other religious groups as religious associations. Non-Catholic religious groups criticized the government’s not recognizing them as churches and their inability to receive benefits such as tax exemptions for clergy salaries and imported religious materials. Religious groups criticized the government’s not recognizing religious marriages conducted without a civil license.

Religious organizations continued to criticize the application of one uniform set of registration rules for all nonprofit organizations, and said they should be recognized as religious groups rather than NGOs. They also criticized the government’s requirement that, in order to register, all such groups have a board of directors registered with the government and file annual financial and activity reports. Small and nondenominational groups said it was particularly difficult for

them to meet these requirements. The government's registration office for civil organizations published separate but almost identical guidelines for churches as for other NGOs. The government started providing a separate intake process for religious groups seeking to register, and instituted a simplified on-line reregistration process for all NGOs.

The official NGO registry office (Unidad de Registro y Seguimiento de Asociaciones Civiles URSAC) in the Ministry of Governance received 1,228 applications during the year. This included 189 from religious associations, of which 148 were approved for registration. In comparison, all 476 community councils that applied were registered and 359 of 567 civil association applicants were registered. The Ministry of Governance rejected applications that did not fit within the legal categories for which the ministry had legal authority.

Some Muslims expressed concern that Muslim women were not permitted to wear the hijab while working as government employees in certain public healthcare facilities, the offices of the national healthcare system, or in judicial facilities. Private female lawyers were reportedly allowed to wear the hijab in court.

Despite a letter issued by the Secretary of Education in 2014 excusing members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church from Saturday school attendance, Church members reported some teachers and principals still expected Saturday attendance at public and private schools. Church leaders also stated public universities failed to respond to, or rejected entirely, requests by Church members to provide alternatives to Saturday classes and exams for Adventist students. The National Autonomous University of Honduras had not responded to requests on this issue submitted in 2013. In addition, the Supreme Court had not addressed the Church's 2014 appeal in a case against the National Teachers University.

A rule drafted in 2010 that required Jehovah's Witnesses to sing the national anthem, salute the national flag, and participate in other patriotic events remained in the Secretariat of Education's school guidelines, despite a 2014 ruling by the secretariat's legal director that the rule was not enforceable. Representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses noted their concern over continuing punishment – including refusals to provide a graduation diploma – by some individual school administrations or teachers after Jehovah's Witness students abstained from singing the national anthem or participating in other patriotic events. Universities permitted students to abstain from patriotic activities after presenting a written statement of their affiliation with the Jehovah's Witnesses. Some public hospitals reportedly refused to treat Jehovah's Witnesses who refused blood transfusions;

one individual was refused treatment for kidney failure after refusing to accept a blood transfusion. Jehovah's Witness representatives expressed concern at what they said was unequal treatment by municipal authorities in the capital, Tegucigalpa; authorities reportedly refused to issue them permits to distribute religious material in public areas, but issued permits to commercial vendors conducting similar but nonreligious business. The Jehovah's Witnesses said they have been unable to receive tax exemptions for imported religious materials since 2010.

Although religious leaders are prohibited from holding political office, some Protestant pastors reportedly held elected office in the national congress, including one who was third in the presidential line of succession established by the constitution.

Reportedly, military base commanders preferentially selected Catholic or Protestant chaplains.

The government routinely invited Catholic and evangelical Protestant leaders to lead prayers at government events.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On December 15, unknown gunmen attacked the house of the executive director of the CEH, killing one of his government-assigned military bodyguards and injuring a second. Reports speculated the attack was linked to the executive director's work as a civil society representative providing support to the ongoing Police Purge Commission, which was charged with reviewing cases of police corruption.

Some sectors of society criticized some evangelical Protestant groups and, to a lesser degree, the Catholic Church for what they said was political activism and close ties to the government. These activities included Protestant pastors holding public office, CEH members serving on the Police Purge Commission, and Catholic and Protestant prayers at government events. Religious groups continued to say media sometimes reported incorrect and inflammatory information about the activities of religious leaders.

Some Muslim women reported they were denied the right to wear the hijab in private sector offices, or were asked to remove it when passing through bank security. Some Muslims reported being denied the right to pray during work hours. Seventh-day Adventists reported the continued refusal of certain private

institutions, including places of employment and schools, to permit them to observe Saturday as a day of rest.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government supported a development program with the Ministry of Governance to improve registration processes for civil society organizations by creating an on-line application and renewal process aimed at reducing the burden for NGOs, including religious organizations, to register and file required reports. U.S. embassy officials maintained a dialogue with religious leaders and organizations, which included discussions of the unequal treatment of religious groups. A particular topic of discussion was the absence of a religious registration law that afforded all religious groups the same rights and privileges as the Catholic Church.