

CHILE 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship, and the law prohibits religious discrimination. Religion and state are officially separate. The National Office of Religious Affairs (ONAR), a government agency within the executive office, is charged with facilitating communication between faith communities and the government, and ensuring the rights of religious minorities are protected. With the stated goal of facilitating civil society input in an organized fashion, ONAR met regularly with its Interfaith Advisory Council to facilitate interreligious dialogue among faith-based leaders and between religious and government leaders.

Arsonists set on fire and burned down more than 10 rural churches and a Catholic seminary in the Araucania Region during the year. No one was hurt in the attacks. A group that claimed to be linked to the indigenous Mapuche community took credit for some of the attacks. In the Jewish community, leaders reported their concern over the tone of social media postings about Israel, although the messages did not specifically mention either the Jewish people or Chilean Jews.

U.S. embassy representatives periodically met with government officials and religious leaders to discuss religious diversity and tolerance and to express concern about the role of the church burnings on religious life in Araucania and neighboring regions. In June the Charge d'Affaires hosted leaders of various religious communities at an iftar designed to emphasize religious tolerance and promote interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.7 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2002 census, 70 percent of the population over the age of 14 self-identifies as Roman Catholic and 15 percent identifies as “evangelical,” a term that refers to all non-Catholic Christian groups except The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Orthodox churches (including the Armenian, Greek, Persian, Serbian, and Ukrainian communities), and Seventh-day Adventists. Bahais, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, members of the Orthodox churches, Seventh-day Adventists, and unspecified members of religious groups together constitute less

than 5 percent of the population. According to the ONAR, approximately 90 percent of those who identify as evangelical belong to Pentecostal movement churches. A more recent census taken in 2012 was deemed flawed and subsequently annulled by the government. According to that census, however, 68 percent of the population identifies as Catholic, 16 percent Protestant or evangelical, 1 percent Jehovah's Witnesses, less than 5 percent other or unspecified, and 12 percent no religious identification.

According to the 2002 census, 5 percent of the population self-identifies as indigenous, of whom 65 percent identify as Catholic, 29 percent as evangelical, and 6 percent as other, which includes adherents of traditional indigenous faith practices.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the free exercise of worship. These practices must not be “opposed to morals, to good customs or to the public order.” Religious groups may establish places of worship, as long as the locations are in compliance with hygiene and security regulations.

According to the constitution, religion and state are officially separate. The law prohibits religious discrimination and provides civil legal remedies to victims of discrimination based on religion or belief and increases criminal penalties for acts of discriminatory violence.

The law does not require religious groups to register with the government; however, there are tax benefits available to those that register. Once registered, a religious group is recognized as a religious nonprofit organization. This differs from the nonprofit status for other nongovernmental organizations in that religious organizations have the option of adopting a charter and bylaws suited to a religious entity rather than a private corporation or a secular nonprofit. Additionally, under the law, religious nonprofit organizations may create affiliates such as charitable foundations, schools, or additional houses of worship, which retain the tax benefits of the religious parent organization. There are currently more than 3,000 religious entities registered, the majority of which are small Pentecostal faith communities. By law, the Ministry of Justice may not refuse to accept the registration petition of a religious entity, although it may object to petitions within 90 days if legal prerequisites for registration are not satisfied.

Applicants for religious nonprofit status must present the Ministry of Justice with an authorized copy of their charter and corresponding bylaws with signatures and identification numbers of those who signed the charter. The bylaws must include the organization's mission, creed, and structure. The charter needs to specify the signers, the name of the organization, its physical address, and must include confirmation that bylaws have been approved. In the event the ministry raises objections to the group, the petitioner has 60 days to address objections the ministry raises or can challenge the ministry in court. Once registered, the state may not dissolve a religious entity by decree. If concerns are raised postregistration about a religious group's activities, the semiautonomous Council for the Defense of the State may initiate a judicial review of the matter. The government has never deregistered a legally registered group. One registration per religious group is sufficient to extend nonprofit status to affiliates, which can be additional places of worship or schools, clubs, and sports organizations, without registering them as separate entities. According to ONAR, the Ministry of Justice receives approximately 30 petitions monthly; the ministry has not objected to any petition and registered every group that completed the required paperwork.

Publicly subsidized schools must offer religious education for two teaching hours per week through high school. Local school administrators decide how religious education classes are structured. The majority of religious instruction in public schools is Catholic, although the Ministry of Education has approved instruction curricula designed by 14 other religious groups. Schools must provide religious instruction for students in the curriculum requested by their parents, and parents may have their children excused from religious education. Parents also have the right to homeschool their children for religious reasons or may enroll them in private, religiously oriented schools.

The law grants religious groups the right to appoint chaplains to offer religious services in public hospitals and prisons. Prisoners may request religious accommodation. Regulations for the armed forces and law enforcement agencies allow officially registered religious groups to appoint chaplains to serve in each branch of the armed forces, in the national uniformed police, and the national investigative police.

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

Government Practices

The Catholic Church continued to have a presence in public and some private schools, private hospitals, prisons, and the military as it founded and managed many social services and institutions beginning in colonial times. The Church, however, did not hold any rights or privileges additional to other religious groups. Representatives from ONAR regularly met with religious leaders with the stated aim of ensuring minority religious practices were respected in state institutions. Authorities continued to support the implementation of the requirement to provide non-Catholic religious education in public schools when requested by parents. Authorities engaged and supported schools through municipal offices of religious affairs, encouraged the development of community-supported religious curricula, and provided religious diversity training to public servants. While prisons and military chaplains were predominately Catholic, ONAR made an effort to counter perceptions of bias and support diversity in the chaplaincy by encouraging other faith communities to prepare and present candidates for these positions. The independent government agency, the National Institute of Human Rights (INDH) reported observing flourishing Protestant faith communities within the prison system.

The ONAR continued to work through the Interfaith Advisory Council – a roundtable organization comprising religious leaders representing the country’s religious communities, including Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and Bahais, and designed to further facilitate and enhance interreligious dialogue within the country by establishing standing meetings among religious leaders and offering government space to host those conversations. At the suggestion of the Advisory Council, President Michelle Bachelet hosted an inaugural iftar to bring together the country’s diverse interfaith community. From October 13-16 the Bahai community dedicated its South American Bahai temple in Santiago, with both government and interfaith participation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

During the year arsonists set on fire and burned down more than 10 rural churches and a Catholic seminary in the Araucania Region. In some cases, a group claiming to be linked to the indigenous Mapuche community took credit for the destruction. Investigations of these arson attacks by law enforcement remained pending at the end of the year; the attacks appeared to fit into a pattern of sabotage directed against a wide range of institutions and business interests in the Araucania region, with the churches representing one of many targets.

Jewish community leaders reported concern about the tone of several social media postings they perceived as threatening. The commentary primarily referenced frustration with Israeli policies and did not specifically mention either the local Jewish community or Jewish people as a whole. For example on August 18, the Palestinian Federation of Chile published on its Facebook site a cartoon depicting a figure smoking a missile cigar and sitting on a Star of David, the bottom point of which is sticking into the back of a dead Palestinian baby, as part of an article protesting Israeli policies.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with officials from the ONAR, regional government leaders, and law enforcement to express concern about the role of the church burnings on the religious life in Araucania and neighboring regions.

The Ambassador and embassy officials met with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom, security, and institutional cooperation among government and religious organizations.

In June the Charge d'Affaires hosted leaders of religious communities at an interfaith iftar. The event celebrated religious diversity, interfaith dialogue, and religious tolerance, and sought to increase cooperation among religious organizations in light of the arson attacks in the Araucania Region.