

MEXICO 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides all persons the right to religious freedom, including the right to engage in religious ceremonies and acts of worship. The constitution declares the country a secular state. Under the constitution, indigenous communities enjoy a protected legal structure, allowing them some measure of self-governance to practice their own particular “uses and customs.” The General Directorate for Religious Affairs (DGAR) within the Secretariat of the Interior (SEGOB) continued to work with state and local officials on criminal investigations involving religious groups. According to SEGOB, during the year, DGAR investigated five cases related to religious freedom at the state level (Morelos, Chiapas, Michoacan, and two in Guerrero) and one at the federal level, compared with four in 2020. During the year, the National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) opened three religious discrimination cases, compared with none in 2020. In June, the Supreme Court of Justice (SCJN), the country’s highest court, ordered Jalisco State authorities to supervise the implementation of a 2020 ruling guaranteeing reintegration and protection for a group of indigenous Jehovah’s Witnesses in Tuxpan de Bolanos, Jalisco. Government officials and leaders within the Roman Catholic Church continued to state the killings and attacks on Catholic priests and evangelical Protestant pastors reflected high levels of generalized violence throughout the country and not attacks based on religion. According to media reports, in January, Catholic authorities representing members of the indigenous Tzotzil Mitzition community in San Cristobal, Chiapas detained an evangelical Protestant pastor, and community members destroyed five houses belonging to him and his family and expelled the pastor and his family from the community. On July 25, indigenous authorities representing a Catholic community in Ahuacachahue, Guerrero imprisoned a non-Catholic family who, citing religious beliefs, refused to sell alcohol during a Catholic festivity. DGAR registered 61 new religious associations during the year, compared with none in 2020.

During the year, there were three reported killings of priests and attacks on priests and pastors. Additional threats against, and abductions of, priests and pastors continued. The Catholic Multimedia Center (CMC) reported a spike in incidents across the Diocese of Cuernavaca, Morelos, involving extortion and assault. Because religious leaders were often involved in politics and social activism and were thus more vulnerable to generalized violence, it was difficult to categorize many incidents of violence against religious leaders as targeted based solely on

religious identity. The CMC identified the country as the most violent country for priests in Latin America for the consecutive 13th year, reporting killings of more than two dozen priests over the past decade and emphasizing that the ranking reflected high levels of generalized violence in the country. Some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) continued to say criminal groups singled out Catholic priests and other religious leaders because of their denunciation of criminal activities and because communities viewed them as moral authority figures. According to media, on March 7 in Oaxaca City, Oaxaca, demonstrators marched for International Women's Day and vandalized church buildings, public structures, and businesses. Also on March 7, a group of women's rights protesters removed pews from the San Felipe Neri Church in Mexico City and attempted to set them on fire. In September, *The Yucatan Times* reported threats and insults against Alejandro Rabinovich, president of the Jewish community in Merida, Yucatan.

U.S. embassy and consulate representatives at all levels met regularly with government officials responsible for religious and indigenous affairs at both the federal and state levels. Embassy representatives at all levels regularly raised religious freedom and freedom of expression issues with foreign affairs and interior secretariat officials. Embassy representatives met with members of religious groups and religiously affiliated NGOs, including the Central Jewish Committee, CMC, and CSW (formerly known as Christian Solidarity Worldwide), to discuss the safety of religious workers, focusing on humanitarian issues and expressing support for religious tolerance. The embassy published several social media posts commemorating religious freedom, including U.S. condemnation of religious freedom violations, a celebration of interfaith unity, and a commemoration of victims persecuted for their religious beliefs.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 130.2 million (midyear 2021). According to the 2020 Mexican government census, approximately 78 percent of the population identifies as Roman Catholic (compared with 83 percent in 2010); 10 percent as Protestant or Christian evangelical; and 1.5 percent as other religious groups, including Judaism, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and Islam. More than 2.5 percent of the population report practicing a religion not otherwise specified (compared with more than 2 percent in 2010), and nearly 8.1 percent report not practicing any religion (compared with 5 percent in 2010). Some indigenous persons adhere to syncretic religions drawing from indigenous beliefs.

Approximately 338,000 individuals self-identify as members of the Church of Jesus Christ. Church of Jesus Christ officials, however, state their membership is approximately 1.5 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 and other Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists; however, fewer than 20 percent of 2020 census respondents in Chiapas self-identify as evangelical Protestant. There are also small numbers of followers of Luz del Mundo (LLDM), the Old Catholic Church (Veterocatolica), and the Church of Scientology, as well as Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Baha'is, and Buddhists. According to media reports, there are 1.5 million followers of LLDM, while the 2020 census reports 190,000 followers. The 2020 census lists 29,985 members from Asian religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. According to a 2015 Autonomous University of Ciudad Juarez report, there are 50,000 Methodists and 30,000 Anglicans in the country. According to the Baha'i Faith Facebook page, there are 12,000 Baha'is, with hundreds coming from small indigenous communities.

An estimated half of the country's approximately 100,000 Mennonites are concentrated in the state of Chihuahua. According to the 2020 census, the Jewish community totals approximately 58,800 persons, with 67 percent living in Mexico City and the state of Mexico. According to the 2020 census, the Muslim community numbers 7,982 persons. According to SEGOB, nearly half of the country's Muslims are concentrated in Mexico City and the state of Mexico, and 170 are in the state of Chiapas; this does not include an Ahmadi Muslim population of several hundred living in the state of Chiapas, most of whom are converts of ethnic Tzotzil Maya origin.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states all persons have the right to follow or adopt the religion of their choosing, or not to follow 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. The constitution declares the country a secular state. Secularism is mentioned in three other articles, including one dedicated to education. Philosophical freedoms of conscience and religion receive 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, which requires a permit, are subject to regulatory law. Active clergy may not hold public office, advocate partisan political views, support political candidates, or publicly oppose the laws or institutions of the state.

To establish a religious association, applicants must certify that 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.

Religious groups are not required to register with DGAR to operate, but registration is required 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. A religious group registering for the first time may not register online; its representatives must register in person. Religious groups must apply for permits to construct new buildings or convert existing buildings into places of worship. Any religious building constructed after January 27, 1992 is the property of the religious group that built it and is subject to relevant taxes. All religious buildings erected before then are considered part of the national patrimony and owned by the state.

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 or own or operate radio or television stations. Government permission is required for commercial radio or television to transmit religious programming.

The federal government coordinates religious affairs through SEGOB. Within SEGOB, DGAR is mandated to promote 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. Each of the 32 states has offices responsible for religious affairs. CONAPRED is an autonomous federal agency responsible for ensuring nondiscrimination and equal opportunity, including for minority religious groups.

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

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 authorization to perform paid religious activities.

The constitution recognizes the right of indigenous communities to autonomy, codifying their right to use their own legal systems for the resolution of conflicts within their communities. Indigenous autonomy is subordinate to human rights provisions as defined in the constitution and the international treaties to which the country is a signatory. The constitution also protects the right of indigenous leaders to practice their own "uses and customs." This right of self-governance for indigenous communities sometimes conflicts with other constitutional rights, including freedom of religion, for members of those communities.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). It claims both an interpretative statement and a reservation relating to freedom of religion in the covenant. Article 18 of the ICCPR states that countries may limit religious freedom only when it is "necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others." The country's interpretative statement states that religious acts must be performed in places of worship unless granted prior permission and that the education of religious ministers is not officially recognized.

Government Practices

DGAR continued to work with state and local officials to mediate conflicts involving religious intolerance. DGAR investigated five cases related to religious freedom at the state and one at the federal level during the year, compared with four in 2020 in Michoacan and Guerrero. Most of these cases involved religious minorities who stated members of the majority religious community where they lived had deprived them of the right to basic services, including water, education, and electricity. In one case, a community forced religious minorities to build a Catholic church. According to DGAR, the state government received most incidents of religious discrimination because the federal government did not have jurisdiction. Some NGOs stated municipal and state officials mediated disputes between religious groups, but government officials said this was not official practice. NGOs noted municipal and state officials frequently sided with local leaders at the expense of minority religions. Some groups also said officials rarely pursued legal punishments against offending local leaders, preferring instead to reach informal, mediated solutions. According to CSW, vulnerable religious communities described high levels of impunity and a lack of protections granted by state officials, whom they said often sided with members of majority religious groups.

During the year, CONAPRED received three complaints of religious discrimination, compared with two in 2020. Two of the three complaints were against public servants purportedly discriminating against Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims, the other was against a private individual who discriminated against an LLDM member, according to CONAPRED. The incidents took place in the states of Baja California, Jalisco, and Veracruz. During the year, CONAPRED documented religious intolerance against LLDM members in schools, workplaces, and temples, possibly linked to the arrest of its church leader Joaquin Garcia, accused of child rape. CONAPRED also recorded antisemitic and anti-Muslim social media attacks during the Israel-Palestinian conflict in May and after the Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in August. In September, in Monclova, Coahuila, CONAPRED mediated a conflict following Father Lazaro Hernandez Soto's statement that "women who abort are useless" and calling on parents to kill their daughters if they committed abortion. In response, the Episcopal Conference of Mexico issued an apology. According to some sources, cases of religious discrimination were often not reported due to lack of awareness of the filing process.

DGAR registered 61 new religious associations during the year, compared with none in 2020. By year's end, DGAR listed 9,615 registered religious associations. Registered groups included 9,571 Christian, 12 Buddhist, 10 Jewish, three Islamic,

two Hindu, and three International Society for Krishna Consciousness groups as well as 14 new religious expression groups. According to DGAR, new religious expressions groups are philosophical or spiritual communities that might be born of new beliefs or be part of a broader religion; DGAR stated they were on the periphery of traditional religions.

On January 10, according to the Christian news site *Evangelical Focus*, Tzotzil Catholics from the indigenous Mitzition community in San Cristobal, in the state of Chiapas, damaged five houses belonging to evangelical Protestant pastor Alejandro Jimenez Jimenez and his sons. Mitzition community authorities arrested the pastor and his son Miguel Jimenez Heredia on charges of illegally building a church. According to the *El Heraldo de Chiapas*, the pastor's family was building a house and not a church. The evangelical Protestant family was expelled by the community and was living in a refugee shelter at year's end. On June 18, according to the *El Heraldo de Chiapas*, when Jimenez returned to visit his mother, authorities detained him and his family for an hour and Catholics burned down what remained of Jimenez's and his family's five homes. Pastor Esdras Alonso Gonzalez accused authorities of not doing enough to address the situation. In August, evangelical Protestant and Muslim leaders protested in San Cristobal de las Casas, demanding that the federal government act on the Jimenez case. On July 25, according to CSW, authorities from the majority Catholic community of Ahuacachahue, Guerrero imprisoned a family who, citing their religious beliefs, refused to sell alcohol during a Catholic festival.

According to CSW, in March, local community members continued to farm the land of one of four evangelical Protestant families forcibly displaced by local community members of Cuamontax, in the state of Hidalgo, in July 2019. In June 2020, the UN special rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief made an inquiry to the government; in August 2020, officials of the Mexican Permanent Mission to the United Nations acknowledged receipt of the inquiry and said they would relay it to the relevant offices. In January, the evangelical Protestants filed a complaint with Hidalgo's Human Rights Office. In March, community leaders denied the Protestant families titles to their land.

NGOs and some religious organizations continued to state that authorities in some rural and indigenous communities expected residents, regardless of their faith, to participate in and fund traditional community religious gatherings and, in some cases, to adhere to the majority religion. According to CSW's 2020 report, some Protestant minority families from indigenous communities were denied access to crucial utilities such as water and electricity, and some children were not allowed

to attend local schools because their families did not adhere to the majority religion.

On April 26, SEGOB released a statement warning of sanctions against religious associations that intervene in partisan politics ahead of June legislative elections.

In June, the SCJN ordered state of Jalisco authorities to supervise the implementation of a 2020 ruling guaranteeing reintegration and protection for a group of indigenous Jehovah's Witnesses in Tuxpan de Bolanos, Jalisco. The SCJN also ordered Jalisco authorities to mediate between community members to uphold the safety of the Jehovah's Witnesses. In 2017, community members expelled the Jehovah's Witnesses for refusing to participate in Catholic community activities. The court decided the affected parties must be reintegrated into their original communities and ordered state authorities to guarantee their security. The court also ruled the Jehovah's Witnesses should be relocated to a different plot of land within the territory and their prior community could continue to deny their "rights and obligations" as community members, "as they no longer share an essential element, their religion." CSW stated many traditional authorities mandate community uniformity in terms of religious practice and belief, compelling all members of the community to participate in the religious activities of the majority or face punishment. According to CSW, the SCJN ruling was the first to provide protection for indigenous persons whose rights were reportedly abused through an indigenous community's legally protected "uses and customs." CSW also stated, "We remain concerned that the court considers it 'legitimate' that these Jehovah's Witnesses should be stripped of their rights as members of their communities. This may embolden those who commit crimes in their efforts to harass and intimidate religious minorities and who are rarely held to account. We urge the state governments of Jalisco and Oaxaca to guarantee the safe return and reintegration of these families. We also call on both federal and state governments in Mexico to uphold the right to freedom of religion or belief and to ensure just outcomes for all other religious minority communities residing in temporary accommodations as a result of being expelled from their communities on account of their religious beliefs."

Religions for Inclusion, a government-run interfaith working group, invited experts to discuss demographic religious affiliation data and the electoral process. In December, the group held a forum on human rights and religion. On a quarterly basis, the group discussed experiences with religious intolerance and discrimination. Members of the group included leaders of the Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Roman Catholic, Church of Jesus Christ, LLD, Old

Catholic Church (Veterocatolica), Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Baha'i, Buddhist, Church of Scientology communities and a DGAR government representative.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Because religious leaders were often involved in political and social activism, thus often being exposed to generalized violence, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being based on religious identity. The CMC identified the country as the most violent country for Catholic priests in Latin America for the 13th consecutive year, stating that more than two dozen priests were killed over the past decade and emphasizing the situation reflected the high levels of generalized violence in the country. According to some NGOs and media reports, organized crime groups continued to single out some Catholic priests and other religious leaders and subject them to killings, extortion attempts, death threats, kidnappings, and intimidation, reportedly due to their perceived access to financial resources or their work helping migrants. Federal government officials and Catholic Church authorities continued to state that these incidents were not a result of religious beliefs, but rather were incidents related to the overall security situation and crime. According to NGO sources, criminal elements attacked Catholic priests and other religious figures to create fear in the community and a culture of silence, which allowed their acts, such as drug and weapons trafficking, to continue unhindered. CSW characterized such incidents of religious intolerance in indigenous communities as “serious,” which is defined as the attempt by a majority religious group to impose its beliefs on a minority religious group.

Multiple NGOs said religious leaders of varied denominations and religions were threatened or attacked, and some kidnapped or killed, throughout the year, including the reported killings of at least three Catholic priests and one catechist. According to the CMC, in March, unidentified individuals kidnapped and killed Father Gumersindo Cortes Gonzalez in Celaya, Guanajuato. Authorities reported the kidnappers had also tortured him. In June, in Durango, crossfire between alleged members of the New Generation Jalisco Cartel and the Sinaloa Cartel killed Father Juan Antonio Orozco Alvarado, according to CMC and media reports. In July, in Simojovel, Chiapas, an unidentified motorcyclist shot and killed Tzotzil Catholic catechist and human rights activist Simon Pedro Perez Lopez. In August, police in Zacatepec, Morelos, found Father Jose Guadalupe Popoca Soto dead. Popoca died during a robbery, according to authorities. According to press reporting, the August 2020 targeted home invasion that killed Teresa Martinez Alarcon, a leader of the Protestant group New Order in Chihuahua, remained unsolved and those responsible acted with “total impunity.”

Members of New Order condemned the killing and called on the government to stop the violence and protect the community.

According to media, on November 12, two unidentified gunmen robbed 70 Church of Jesus Christ missionaries in Torreon, Coahuila during a conference. Sam Penrod, spokesperson for the Church of Jesus Christ, said in a news release, “The robbers intimidated the 13 sisters and 57 elders, and a few were hit or kicked...The mission president and his wife were also assaulted and threatened with a knife.” After the incident, the Church of Jesus Christ evacuated its missionaries from Torreon. On November 20, authorities apprehended two alleged gunmen responsible for the crime. On March 14, a gunman shot a friar in the atrium of the Basilica of Our Lady of Zapopan, Guadalajara. Authorities arrested the suspected assailant.

According to media reports in November, Father Alfredo Gallegos, a parish priest in Michoacan, called from the pulpit for parishioners to arm themselves to defend against violent gangs. Father Gilberto Vergara, another parish priest in Michoacan, said he preferred a more nuanced approach, stating, “This thing about civilians taking up arms never ends well.”

According to the CMC, unidentified individuals burglarized, vandalized, and committed acts of violence against churches, with a weekly average of more than 20, compared with 27 in 2020, Catholic churches affected throughout the year. The CMC reported a spike of incidents across the Diocese of Cuernavaca involving extortions and assaults. The Bishop of Cuernavaca, in the state of Morelos, also reported what he said was a wave of attacks, robberies, and looting of churches.

According to media, on March 7 in Oaxaca City, demonstrators marching for International Women’s Day vandalized the San Cosme and San Damian Churches, public structures, and businesses. Also on March 7, a group of women’s rights protesters removed pews from San Felipe Neri Church in Mexico City and attempted to set them on fire. An Open Doors 2021 report on Mexico linked violence against Christians to persons believing Christians are opposed to women’s rights.

According to media reports, on December 11, 19, and 25, three robberies of nonreligious items occurred in two churches in the Diocese of Ciudad Juarez.

In September, *The Yucatan Times* reported threats and insults against Alejandro Rabinovich, president of the Jewish community in Merida, Yucatan. Beginning in April, Rabinovich started receiving threats, including a series of telephone messages such as, “You and your piece of [expletive]... Jewish family, we don’t want you here, we want all the Jews pieces of [expletive]..., Zionists get out of here.” In September, unidentified individuals painted Nazi symbols and the message “Get out Jews...” on the front wall of his home. Rabinovich filed a criminal complaint with the state attorney general’s office.

Jewish community representatives assessed online antisemitic messages, symbols, and language from January through September 10, finding Twitter accounted for 97 percent of the antisemitic content, YouTube 1 percent, news sources 1 percent, and blogs 0.5 percent. Antisemitic tweets typically referenced the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly in May after the two sides exchanged rocket attacks. Other less common derogatory language featured Holocaust denial, pro-Hitler statements, and questioning Israel’s right to exist.

According to CSW, on September 6, community members of the Huejutla de los Reyes municipality threatened to cut off essential services and expel two families belonging to the First Baptist Church if they continued to hold religious services and did not pay the rest of a community-imposed January 2020 fine for holding religious ceremonies in their homes. Hidalgo State authorities said the threatened individuals remained in the community, with access to essential services, and were able to practice their religion, noting the case fell under the community’s uses and customs laws. Hidalgo officials reported working with the two families and the communities in an attempt to reach an agreement.

The Catholic Aid to the Church in Need 2021 report assessed that violence against religious leaders in the country appeared not to be religiously motivated, but rather that leaders suffered violence in connection with their work assisting victims. Open Doors’ 2021 assessment reported criminal groups targeted Christians for being outspoken against violence. According to CSW, in indigenous communities, religious majorities continued to punish and/or expel community members who left a community’s dominant religious group.

From November 21-28, more than one thousand Catholics from Latin America and the Caribbean held the first ever virtual and partly in-person, regionwide, ecclesiastical assembly in Mexico City. Participants discussed the Catholic Church’s priorities for the next 10 years, such as enhancing youth and women’s leadership opportunities and advocating for victims of social injustice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy and consulate representatives continued to meet regularly with government officials responsible for religious and indigenous affairs at both the federal and state levels. In meetings with foreign affairs and SEGOB officials, embassy and consulate officers raised concerns regarding the continued harassment of religious leaders and abuses against religious minorities, especially evangelical Protestants, by religious majority groups and local authorities.

Embassy representatives met with members of religious groups and religiously affiliated NGOs, including the Mennonite Central Committee, Central Jewish Committee, CMC, and CSW, to discuss the safety of religious workers, focusing on humanitarian issues, the status of religious freedom, support for religious tolerance. Consulate officials met with the Jewish Social Center (Centro Social Israelita) to discuss tolerance for religious diversity.

The embassy published several social media posts commemorating religious freedom, including on U.S. condemnations of religious freedom abuses, a celebration of interfaith unity, and a commemoration of victims persecuted for their religious beliefs.