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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Bolivia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution stipulates the state is independent of religion and provides for “freedom of thought, spirituality, religion, and worship, expressed individually or collectively, in public and in private.” The constitution and other laws accord educational institutions the right to teach religion, including Indigenous spiritual belief classes.

The government again took no action to implement or enforce the 2019 religious freedom law, particularly aspects pertaining to the registration requirements for religious organizations, while it waited for the additional administrative regulations to be approved by Supreme Decree. The government denied detained former President Jeanine Anez and detained opposition leader Luis Fernando Camacho access to religious leaders from their churches. Both leaders suffered from poor health in detention and were vocal about their strongly held religious beliefs.

Following media publication of a deceased Spanish priest’s confession that he sexually abused children in Bolivian schools between the 1970s and 1990s, the country’s Catholic bishops said they would set up two commissions to investigate the abuse and help victims. In addition, the senate established a special investigation commission to examine cases of sexual abuse committed by clergy. The Bolivian Bishop’s Conference criticized “excesses” that person.

from the public prosecutor's office committed while looking for information related to the abuse allegations during August raids of Jesuit offices.

During the year, U.S. embassy officials were again unable to discuss religious freedom issues with government officials because the government said it considered those issues part of its "internal affairs." Embassy representatives regularly engaged religious leaders to underscore the importance of religious tolerance and freedom. In September, the Chargé participated in an event organized by the Bolivian Interfaith Dialogue to celebrate the UN-declared International Day of Peace. At the event, the Chargé encouraged religious leaders from the evangelical Protestant, Sikh, Muslim, Catholic, and Jewish communities to engage in interreligious discourse and promote global peace. Throughout the year, embassy officials met individually with leaders of the Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Jewish communities to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country.

Section I.

Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12.2 million (mid-year 2023). According to U.S. government figures, 70 percent of the population identifies as Catholic; 14.5 percent as evangelical Protestant; 6.6 percent as none; 3.5 percent as other; 2.5 percent as Seventh-day Adventist; 1.2 percent as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ); and the remainder as unspecified, agnostic, or atheist. According to the local leader of the Church of Jesus Christ, approximately 300,000 followers reside in the country. Approximately 5 percent of the population identifies with smaller religious groups, and 5 percent self-identifies as nonbelievers. Approximately 70,000 Mennonites live in the lowland province of Santa Cruz, according to community leaders. There are approximately 2,500 Muslims and 180 Jews, according to leaders of the respective faiths and news reports. Many Indigenous communities, concentrated in rural areas, practice a mix of Catholic and Indigenous spiritual traditions.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

According to the constitution and its amendments, the state respects and provides for “freedom of thought, spirituality, religion and worship,” expressed individually or collectively, in public and in private. The constitution stipulates the state is independent of all religion.

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, including in access to educational institutions, health services, and employment, and it protects the right of access to public sport and recreational activities without regard to religion.

The law governing religious freedom and religious and spiritual organizations creates a clear distinction between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious organizations. Under the law, religious organizations are constituted to practice, profess, and teach their specific faith or religion, while NGOs have no such faith-based ties. The religious freedom law requires all religious or spiritual organizations to inform the government of all financial, legal, social, and religious activities. The law regulates religious or spiritual organizations’ finances and labor practices by requiring they use funds exclusively to achieve the organization’s objectives, banning the distribution of money among members, subjecting all employees to national labor laws, requiring the organizations to register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and compelling them to pay taxes. Pursuant to a concordat with the Holy See, the Catholic Church is exempt from registration.

Religious organizations must meet 14 documentary requirements to register with the government. These include submitting notarized legal documents, including the organization’s statutes, internal regulations, and procedures; rental agreement documents, utility invoices, and a site map for the place(s) of worship; detailed information on board members and legal representatives, including criminal background checks; INTERPOL certificates for foreigners; proof of fiscal solvency; a leadership organization chart, with names, addresses, identification card numbers, and photographs; a full list of members and identifying information; details on activities and services provided by the organization, including the location of the services; and information on their financing source(s), domestic and foreign.

The requirements for classification as a spiritual or religious organization vary slightly, but the government requires essentially the same type of information from both. The constitution defines a spiritual organization as a group of natural, national, and/or foreign persons who organize themselves to carry out practices that develop their spirituality according to their ancestral worldview. Most spiritual organizations are Indigenous in their origins. The constitution defines a religious organization as a group of natural, national, and/or foreign persons who organize themselves with the purpose of carrying out practices of worship

and/or belief around a Supreme Being to develop their spirituality and religiosity. Religious and spiritual organizations must be nonprofit.

The government may revoke a spiritual or religious organization's operating license for noncompliance with the registration requirements if the organization does not produce an annual report of activities for more than two consecutive years; does not comply with its stated objectives; carries out activities different from those established in its statutes; or carries out activities contrary to the country's constitution, laws, morality, or "good customs." A religious or spiritual organization may also lose its operating license if it does not comply with the deadline for renewing the license. The government may not deny legal recognition to any organization based on its articles of faith.

The fee to obtain an operating license as a religious organization is 6,780 bolivianos (\$990). The fee for a spiritual organization is 4,068 bolivianos (\$600). Although the government does not provide an official explanation for the difference in these licensing fees, government officials say spiritual organizations are charged less because they are smaller than religious organizations.

The constitution and other laws provide educational institutions the option to teach religion classes, including Indigenous spiritual belief classes, with the stated aim of encouraging mutual respect among religious communities. While religion classes are optional, schools must teach ethics using curriculum materials that promote religious tolerance. The government does not restrict religious teaching in public or private schools, and it does not restrict a student from attending private, religiously affiliated schools. The law also requires all schools to accept students regardless of their religious affiliation.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Religious leaders and other civil society members said the government again took no action to implement or enforce the 2019 religious freedom law, particularly aspects pertaining to registration requirements, while it waited for related administrative regulations to be approved by Supreme Decree. According to protocol, as part of the process to implement a law, the president issues a supreme decree based on a proposal by the minister in charge of the subject. The government did not give a reason for the delay in issuing the supreme decree.

Members of the evangelical Protestant community continued to say several smaller religious communities had formed congregations that held services at unofficial worship locations and conducted other activities without registering. These smaller communities continued to refuse to register their organizations because, according to sources, they preferred not to provide the government access to their internal information. Sources continued to state these unregistered groups could neither own property nor hold bank accounts in their organization's name; instead, money for a group was generally held in a bank account controlled by the leader's family.

According to the MFA's Office of Religion and Nongovernmental Organizations, in December, there were 338 groups listed under the requirements of the religious freedom law, compared with 680 in 2022 and 648 in 2021. There was no information available explaining the difference in the number of groups registered. Representatives of some organizations said they were waiting to register until the regulations associated with the 2019 religious freedom law were in place. Other sources said the current and previous governments did not have a clear database of registered groups.

Religious groups said the registration process continued to take four to six months to complete in most cases. In 2021, MFA officials stated they were working on a system to digitize the registration process to reduce the timeline to one to two months; however, according to some civil society members, the government still had not completed the process at the end of the year.

According to civil society groups, the government denied imprisoned former president Jeanine Anez, an evangelical Christian, access to a religious leader from her church, despite her physical and mental health problems. Arrested in 2021 on charges of terrorism, sedition, and conspiracy, a court in 2022 sentenced Anez to 10 years in prison for staging a coup. Authorities allowed her to have contact only with her family and her lawyers. The government treated detained opposition leader Luis Fernando Camacho, a Catholic, similarly, according to multiple civil society groups and individuals with direct knowledge of his condition. He had restricted access to visitors and no access to a priest. Both leaders suffered from poor health and were vocal about their strongly held religious beliefs. According to media reports, Camacho remained in pretrial detention at the end of the year, without a set date for his trial to begin. Authorities arrested him in 2022 on charges of terrorism, with the charges of bribery and fomenting rebellion added in 2023.

According to one evangelical Protestant leader from the north of the country, his group continued to focus on engaging the government to prevent doctors from being forced to

perform abortions if doing so violated their religious beliefs. While the law allows doctors to refuse to perform abortions due to their religious beliefs, the evangelical leader expressed concern that the law would not be upheld uniformly.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In April, the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* published diary entries by the late Spanish Jesuit priest Alfonso Pedrajas in which he confessed to sexually abusing at least 85 children in Catholic boarding schools that he ran in the country from the 1970s to the 1990s. The publication of the story led to protests outside Jesuit offices around the country and approximately 200 persons coming forward with allegations of sexual abuse by Pedrajas or other priests, mainly in Bolivia's Catholic-run schools. In May, the country's Catholic bishops said they would set up two commissions to investigate the abuse and help victims who, instead of receiving protection, "found themselves with a church deaf to their sufferings." In July, the senate established a special investigation commission to examine cases of sexual abuse committed by clergy, with senate president Andronico Rodriguez saying it "did not have any biased objective ... to juridically or politically persecute the church." The Bolivian Bishop's Conference criticized "excesses" during successive raids on Jesuit offices on August 28 in La Paz, Sucre, El Alto, and Santa Cruz by public prosecutors' personnel looking for information related to the allegations of abuse.

The Catholic Church continued its projects to help the poor, no matter their religious affiliation. In particular, the church operated temporary shelters such as the Casa de Acogida Cardenal Julio Terrazas in Santa Cruz for migrants and victims of trafficking. The church also provided educational services to the needy of all faiths.

On September 21, the Bolivian Interfaith Dialogue, comprised of representatives from evangelical Protestant, Sikh, Muslim, Catholic and Jewish communities, organized an event to mark the UN International Day of Peace. During the event, representatives from the Catholic, Jewish and Muslim faith gave remarks and led prayers. The representative of the Jewish community said, "The synagogue is my home and also yours" as an invitation to non-Jews to share and find a common ground. He also said, "The interfaith dialogue is the cornerstone of any peace process that helps social coherence and conflict prevention." On November 18, the organization showed the film *My God What Have We Done?* to underscore "the importance of finding coexistence and respect among the different religious traditions in Bolivia."

Participants included representatives from the Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, Baha'i Faith, evangelical Christian, Sikh, Soto Zen and Church of Jesus Christ communities.

Following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks, religious leaders reported what they said were hate comments on social media, including messages of antisemitism. Muslim and Jewish communities worked to promote peace in the country through interfaith dialogue.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

During the year, embassy officials continued to be unable to meet or discuss religious freedom issues with government officials because the government said it considered those issues part of its "internal affairs."

On September 21, the Chargé participated in a Bolivian Interfaith Dialogue-organized event at the La Paz Metropolitan Cathedral to mark the UN International Day of Peace with religious leaders from the evangelical Protestant, Sikh, Muslim, Catholic, and Jewish communities. At the event, the Chargé encouraged the religious leaders to engage in interreligious discourse and promote global peace. Throughout the year, embassy officials met with leaders of the Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Jewish communities to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country and to underscore the importance of religious tolerance and freedom. On September 14, the embassy hosted a luncheon for members of the Interfaith Dialogue to discuss future initiatives to promote religious freedom.

On social media, the embassy posted an account of the Chargé's participation in the UN International Day of Peace. The embassy also posted congratulatory messages to Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities on important religious holidays during the year to show support for the religious freedom of multiple faiths.

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