

# PARAGUAY 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution accords individuals the right to choose, change, and freely practice their religion and prohibits religious discrimination. It specifically recognizes the right of indigenous communities to express their religions freely. The constitution states the relationship between the state and the Roman Catholic Church is based on independence, cooperation, and autonomy. The Vice Ministry of Worship (VMW) continued to implement a law requiring all religious and philosophical groups to complete a mandatory registration process but did not impose penalties or monetary sanctions on groups that did not register by the end of the year, extending the deadline indefinitely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the VMW, approximately 50 percent of religious groups were registered at year's end. In August, the Catholic Christian Apostolic National Church of Paraguay (ICCAN) began its third attempt to register with the VMW following a second VMW rejection in 2020. By year's end, VMW had not responded to ICCAN. The Jehovah's Witnesses Association reported the Supreme Court concluded three cases involving individual Jehovah's Witnesses receiving hospital blood transfusions against their will, ruling against two of the suits and dismissing the third.

Some religious representatives said the Roman Catholic Church continued to exercise greater influence in politics by swaying public opinion more than any other religious group. On May 14, the Roman Catholic Church hosted its annual religious service to honor the country's independence. President Mario Abdo Benitez and other members of the government attended. During the service, Archbishop of Asuncion Edmundo Valenzuela criticized the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In October, U.S. embassy officials met with VMW Director General Marco Mendez and discussed ICCAN's registration status, government actions to facilitate the registration process, the promotion of religious freedom, interreligious dialogue, and the provision of state funding for schools run by religious groups. Embassy officials met with representatives of the Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Mennonite, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Muslim, ICCAN, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jewish communities to discuss interfaith respect for religious diversity and hear their views on the status of religious freedom in the country and the government's attitude towards and treatment of their communities.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.3 million (midyear 2021). The VMW estimates 88 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 6 percent evangelical Protestant. The Association of Evangelical Ministers of Paraguay estimates that 9.6 percent of the population is evangelical Protestant. Groups that together constitute between 1 and 4 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, the Church of Jesus Christ, Muslims, Buddhists, Mennonites, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), Baha'is, adherents of indigenous beliefs, and atheists and nonbelievers.

Members of the Mennonite Church, estimated by Church leaders to number 46,000, are prominent in the remote areas of the central Chaco and some eastern regions of the country. ICCAN estimates its membership at more than 100,000. The Church of Jesus Christ estimates it has 96,000 members. Jehovah's Witnesses estimate the group's membership at 11,000. According to Muslim leaders, there are approximately 10,000 Muslims, with the majority in Ciudad del Este. According to representatives of the Jewish community, there are approximately 1,000 Jews, living primarily in Asuncion.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides individuals, including members of indigenous communities, the right to choose, change, and freely practice their religion. The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and specifically recognizes the right of indigenous communities to express their religion freely.

According to the constitution, the relationship between the state and the Roman Catholic Church is based on "independence, cooperation, and autonomy." The Church, however, must comply with all regulations the state imposes on other religious groups. The law allows political parties based on a specific faith, but the constitution prohibits active members of the clergy from any religious group from running for public office.

The law requires all religious and philosophical groups to register with the VMW and submit annual reports stating the organization's key leadership and functions. Organizations must complete a form containing 14 items, provide supporting documents to the VMW, and pay a fee of 125,000 guaranies (\$18) to register. The

form requests basic information, including entity name, mission or vision, history in the country, addresses of houses of worship, membership size, and types of activities. The VMW also requires the certification of a legal representative and the entity's bylaws as supporting documentation for registration. VMW regulations require that names of religious entities be sufficiently distinguishable to avoid confusing worshippers. Once registered, religious and philosophical groups must update their registration on an annual basis and pay an annual fee of 62,000 guaranies (\$9).

The VMW may apply nonmonetary administrative sanctions against organizations that fail to register, including ordering the suspension of religious services. The National Anti-Money Laundering Secretariat requires that all religious organizations register as nonfinancial agents. Religious groups must demonstrate legal status as a nonprofit organization and agree to annual recertification. Annual recertification requires groups to resubmit the registration form with updated information. Religious leaders must submit to financial and criminal background checks.

The law prohibits religious instruction in public schools. The constitution provides private schools the right to offer religious education; staff teaching these courses are required to "possess suitability and ethical integrity." Registration for private religious schools is not mandatory, but the Ministry of Education and Science recognizes only diplomas and degrees granted by registered institutions, and only registered schools with nonprofit status may receive subsidies for teachers' salaries. Students belonging to religious groups other than the one associated with a private religious school may enroll. All students, however, are expected to participate in religious activities that are a mandatory part of the schedule.

The constitution and laws provide for conscientious objection to military service based on religious beliefs.

Foreign missionaries who are members of registered religious groups are eligible for no-cost residency visas from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Missionaries must also register annually with the VMW to receive official documentation identifying their status. Missionaries choosing not to register may enter the country on tourist visas. A law provides for Mennonites to implement their own education programs and exempts them from military service based on their religious beliefs.

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

## Government Practices

The VMW did not impose penalties or monetary sanctions on religious groups that did not complete its mandatory registration or reregistration process by the end of the year, extending the deadline indefinitely with the intention of reassessing annually based on the status of the COVID-19 pandemic and progress made in implementing a fully virtual registration process. The VMW continued to focus on raising public awareness of the registration law and stated it continued to implement the registration law consistently across religious groups. According to the VMW, once it received all required information and documents from a religious group, it completed the process in 15 days.

The VMW reported that 17 new groups registered during the year, bringing the total of religious groups having active registrations with the government to 586. Of the 586 groups, 407 did not renew their registration during the year, taking advantage of the VMW's indefinite extension of the renewal period due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The VMW stated it considered these groups to be actively registered.

According to the VMW, approximately 50 percent of religious groups were registered at year's end, compared with 15 percent reported the previous year. VMW representatives attributed the discrepancy to an effort to digitalize VMW records over the past year, allowing more accurate statistics and a better estimate of the number of nonregistered religious groups, which the revised data showed to be much lower than 2020 estimates. Although the VMW continued to offer electronic (email) registration, the requirement to travel to Asuncion to pay registration fees and pick up proof of registration remained a major barrier for submitting and renewing applications.

ICCAN in August began its third attempt to officially register with the VMW, after VMW rejected its second request in 2020. By year's end, VMW had not approved ICCAN's request. The VMW said it did not approve ICCAN's registration due to the inclusion of "Catholic" in its title, making ICCAN's name not sufficiently distinguishable from the Roman Catholic Church. The VMW had stated there was no other reason for its decision and would approve ICCAN's registration if the two religious groups could agree on an acceptable change to ICCAN's official name. An ICCAN representative stated he believed the VMW's justification was not in accordance with the law, and suggested VMW officials were following instructions from the Roman Catholic Church.

The Jehovah's Witnesses Association reported the Supreme Court during the year concluded three cases from previous years involving individual Jehovah's Witnesses receiving hospital blood transfusions against their will. The Supreme Court ruled against two of the Jehovah's Witnesses' suits and dismissed the third suit following the death of the individual involved. The Jehovah's Witnesses Association stated there were no new reports of forced blood transfusions during the year.

The VMW reported the Ministry of Education provided subsidies to schools of various religious affiliations. The ministry stated it distributed subsidies based primarily on the need to reach certain underserved communities, focusing especially on the underserved rural Chaco region. The ministry continued to subsidize the salaries of hundreds of teachers in registered, nonprofit schools operated by predominantly Roman Catholic religious communities.

According to representatives of the Mennonite community, the government continued to provide subsidies to their schools; Jewish community members said they did not request government subsidies. According to a ministry representative, the ministry maintained an agreement with the Roman Catholic Church governing the allocation of subsidies to schools in areas not served by public schools. The representative also stated that a separate agreement set very similar regulations for subsidy allocation to other religious schools located in underserved areas serving student populations and providing educational or scholarship services to students. Mennonite schools in Boqueron Department continued a consultation process with departmental authorities concerning Mennonite and Ministry of Education curricular priorities.

The government continued to support chaplaincy programs open to all religious groups in the armed forces. The programs included the training of clergy to provide services to members of the armed forces deployed either in combat zones or on peacekeeping missions. The government also continued to allow all registered religious groups to operate in and provide their services within prisons for adults and youth. During the year, however, only Roman Catholic and Protestant groups made use of this option.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

Observers, including those from nongovernmental organizations, political pundits, leaders of different religious groups, and the press, stated the Roman Catholic Church continued to maintain an influential role within society that other religious

groups lacked. According to media reports, because Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion, both citizens and the government valued the opinion of the Church on political matters.

In a May interview with the daily newspaper *Ultima Hora*, former senator Hugo Estigarribia said of the Catholic Church's influence on politicians, "The Catholic Church in our country saves you or sinks you – it's that simple," and continued that what the Catholic Church thinks and the pressure it exerts are fundamental to the country's politics. Church representatives often commented publicly on congressional legislation, sometimes impacting the shaping of public policy. For example, Church leaders made public statements on the importance of social justice as Congress debated land reform legislation. The leaders also made public statements regarding the renegotiation of the Itaipu treaty with Brazil, stressing that the country needed negotiators who were ethical, moral, and who enjoyed the people's trust.

Catholic Church leaders also spoke publicly against the government's COVID-19 policies, calling for a return to in-person classes at schools and criticizing potential plans for vaccine requirements at public gatherings. President Abdo Benitez met with Church leaders during the March antigovernment demonstrations to seek their advice on how to address protesters' grievances and avoid impeachment. ICCAN representatives complained the Roman Catholic Church was actively working to damage its legitimacy. In its September "Pastoral Guidance" to followers, the Roman Catholic Church said ICCAN was "a sect that usurps the Catholic name and liturgy," and warned that any sacraments received at ICCAN churches would not be considered valid at Roman Catholic ones.

On May 14, the Roman Catholic Church hosted its annual service to honor the country's independence. President Benitez, Vice President Hugo Velazquez, Supreme Court President Cesar Diesel, Attorney General Sandra Quinonez, and other members of the government attended. During the service, Archbishop of Asuncion Edmundo Valenzuela criticized the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and called for an end to corruption that could jeopardize efforts to confront the virus. He also warned against teaching "gender ideology" to children and adolescents based on the Church's concern that such content encouraged tolerance of abortion and LGBTQI+ lifestyles.

Roman Catholic Church representatives once again offered in-person services celebrating the December 8 Virgen de Caacupe holiday, a local variant of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Organizers required pilgrims to wear masks and

remain physically distanced from one another. They also required attendees to be fully vaccinated, although there was no system in place to verify anyone's vaccination status. Bishop of Caacupe Ricardo Valenzuela used the opportunity to criticize what he termed the government's weak COVID-19 response and continued prevalence of government corruption and impunity, particularly in the judiciary.

The National Institute for Indigenous Affairs stated in August that an unknown number of evangelical Christian leaders associated with three different churches raped and impregnated 10 adolescent girls from the Yvy Pyte indigenous community in Amambay Department earlier in the year. The VMW reported none of the three churches involved were officially registered with the government. At year's end, the Public Ministry was investigating the case.

The VMW reported that 68 foreign missionaries registered or reregistered during the year, compared with 106 in 2020. Most missionaries were members of the Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant churches. The Church of Jesus Christ reported its foreign missionaries had begun returning to the country after departing in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Church representatives stated they hoped to have a total of 360 foreign missionaries in country by the end of the year.

A Jewish community leader pressed the government to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism.

A representative from the Church of Jesus Christ reported the Church had a close relationship with the Roman Catholic Church, with which it cooperated on humanitarian assistance and other development projects, including providing sources of drinking water to underserved communities in the Chaco region.

Christian and Jewish groups did not host any official interreligious events during the year.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

In October, embassy officials met with VMW Director General Mendez to discuss issues related to ICCAN's registration process, government actions to facilitate the registration of other religious groups, the promotion of religious freedom, interreligious dialogue, and the provision of state funding for salaries at schools run by religious groups.

Embassy officials met with Roman Catholic, Mennonite, Muslim, ICCAN, evangelical Protestant, Church of Jesus Christ, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jewish leaders to discuss interfaith respect for religious diversity and hear their views on the state of religious freedom in the country and the government's attitude towards and treatment of their communities.