

PARAGUAY 2022 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.”

In February, the Vice Ministry of Worship (VMW), under the Ministry of Education and Science, implemented a resolution updating the regulations, procedures, fees, and penalties surrounding the registration process for all religious and philosophical groups. According to the VMW, approximately 50 percent of all religious groups in the country were registered at year's end. As of year's end, the Catholic Christian Apostolic National Church of Paraguay (ICCAN) reported the VMW had not acted on the group's third application to register, submitted in 2021; the VMW said it could 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, as required by law. On December 15, the VMW hosted an Interreligious Symposium open to all religious groups in the country on the topic of “The Family as the Main Educational Setting.” Observers said the Roman Catholic Church continued to exercise influence in politics by swaying public opinion more than any other religious group. During the Roman Catholic Church's annual service to honor the country's independence, then-Archbishop of Asuncion Adalberto Martinez Flores warned that corruption and impunity were weakening democratic institutions. On August 27, Martinez became the first Paraguayan to be elevated to Cardinal in the Roman Catholic Church. In September, the conservative group Citizen Network for Childhood and Adolescence petitioned the Ministry of Education and Science to cancel the EU-funded Education Transformation 2030 project because, according to the group, it “imposed international concepts like multiculturalism and inclusion that would erode ‘traditional’ Paraguayan family values.”

A representative of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (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 and building clinics providing free medical and dental care in Asuncion.

In October, U.S. embassy officials met with VMW Director General Marco Mendez and discussed government actions to facilitate the registration process, and ICCAN's experiences in registering. Embassy officials also discussed with Mendez 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, Muslim, ICCAN, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Jewish communities to discuss interfaith respect for religious diversity and hear 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 country's total population at 7.4 million (midyear 2022). The VMW estimates 88 percent of the population are Roman Catholic and 6 percent evangelical Protestant, while the Association of Evangelical Ministers of Paraguay estimates that 9.6 percent of the population are evangelical Protestant. Groups that together constitute the remainder of the population include ICCAN followers, the Church of Jesus Christ, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Mennonites, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), Baha'is, adherents of Indigenous beliefs, and atheists and nonbelievers.

ICCAN estimates its membership at more than 100,000. The Church of Jesus Christ estimates it has 96,000 members. 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. Jehovah's Witnesses estimate the group's membership at 11,000. Muslim leaders estimate there are approximately 10,000 Muslims, with the majority in Ciudad del Este. Jewish community representatives estimate 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 140,000 guaranies (\$19) 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 70,000 guaranies (\$10).

The VMW may apply nonmonetary administrative sanctions against organizations that fail to register, including ordering the suspension of religious services and a fine of 2,200,000 guaranies (\$301). 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. Groups that fail to update their registration annually must pay a fine of 440,000 guaranies (\$60). 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

Church representatives often commented publicly on congressional legislation, sometimes impacting the shaping of public policy. For example, Roman Catholic Church leaders made public statements in June on the importance of social justice and protecting marginalized populations like Indigenous communities following violent evictions against those communities, including some carried out by the government. The leaders also made public statements condemning government corruption.

In February, the Ministry of Education and Science implemented a resolution updating the regulations, procedures, fees, and penalties surrounding the registration process for all religious and philosophical groups. As part of the

implementation, the VMW began imposing penalties such as written reprimands and monetary sanctions ranging from 440,000 (\$60) to 2,200,000 guaranies (\$301) on religious groups that did not complete the mandatory registration or reregistration process by their yearly deadline. The VMW had suspended its collection of penalties during the COVID-19 pandemic. The VMW continued to focus on raising public awareness of the registration law through local radio and social media and stated it continued to implement the registration law consistently across all religious groups. According to the VMW, once it received all required information and documents from a religious group, it completed the review process in 15 days.

During the year, the VMW reported that 35 new groups registered, bringing the total number of religious groups registered with the government to 621. According to the VMW, approximately 50 percent of all religious groups in the country were registered at year's end. 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. The VMW acknowledged the barrier.

As of year's end, the VMW said it was still unable to 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. ICCAN submitted its third attempt to register in 2021. The VMW stated there was no other reason for its decision and that it 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, but by the end of the year, the group had not decided whether to file a complaint against VMW.

The Jehovah's Witnesses Association stated that while it remained concerned about the possibility of its members receiving blood transfusions against their will, there were no new reports of forced blood transfusions during the year.

According to recent media reports, because Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion, both citizens and the government valued the opinion of the church on political matters. One academic publication reported, "In the country with the highest percentage of people of faith in the Americas, the influence of churches,

especially the Catholic [Church], in the political sphere is evident.” Prior to Asuncion Archbishop Adalberto Martinez Flores’s elevation to Cardinal, media reports stated this move would give the Church even more influence. “There is no doubt that having a Paraguayan Cardinal will give the Paraguayan [Catholic] Church even more visibility, and the opinions and positions of a cardinal will have greater consideration.” On August 27, Martinez became the first Paraguayan elevated to Cardinal of the Catholic Church. President Abdo Benitez met Cardinal Martinez at an official event September 1 upon the Cardinal’s return from the Vatican. Leading newspaper *Ultima Hora* said Martinez’s new position was important for society as a whole, as he could now comment not only on church issues, but also on political and social ones.

In September, the conservative group Citizen Network for Childhood and Adolescence petitioned the Ministry of Education and Science to cancel the EU-funded Education Transformation 2030 project because the group said, it “imposed international concepts like multiculturalism and inclusion that would erode ‘traditional’ Paraguayan family values.” According to EU representatives, the project would not include any changes to the education curriculum.

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. No other religious group reported requesting government subsidies. According to a Ministry of Education 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.

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.

In August, Vice President Hugo Velazquez suggested to followers that his Catholicism was the reason a foreign government targeted him for being significantly corrupt.

On December 15, the VMW hosted a National Interreligious Symposium open to all religious groups with a presence in the country on the topic of “The Family as the Main Educational Setting.”

On May 15, the Roman Catholic Church hosted its annual service to honor the country’s independence. President Abdo Benitez, then Foreign Minister Euclides Acevedo, Attorney General Sandra Quinonez, and other members of the government attended. During the service, then-Archbishop of Asuncion Martinez warned that corruption and impunity were weakening democratic institutions. He stated many public institutions had declared themselves “prolife and profamily,” but he told attendees that the government had to do more to protect life “in all its stages” and “strengthen the family.”

Roman Catholic Church representatives offered in-person services celebrating the December 8 Virgen de Caacupe holiday, a local variant of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. Bishop of Caacupe Ricardo Valenzuela used the opportunity to criticize the continued prevalence of government corruption and impunity, particularly in the judiciary, and he reiterated the Church's concerns regarding the poor, the Indigenous landless communities, drug trafficking, and influence peddling.

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, continued to report that the

Roman Catholic Church maintained an influential role within society that other religious groups lacked. Catholic architecture, vocabulary, and symbols were commonplace in the country. Catholic churches were prevalent in populated areas, and often many public parks and streets hosted vendors selling Catholic-themed art. Private vehicles displayed bumper stickers with Catholic-themed images. According to the news outlet 5 Dias, some of the best and most competitive schools in the country were affiliated with the Catholic Church. Also, annual bank holidays included not only Christmas and Holy Week (Easter), but also multiple specifically Catholic festivals such as the Virgin of Caacupe Day and the Founding of Asuncion. During these festivals, objects adorned with Catholic images and symbols were widely available to purchase.

The VMW reported that 90 foreign missionaries registered or reregistered during the year, compared with 68 in 2021. Most missionaries were members of the Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant churches. The Church of Jesus Christ reported it had 297 foreign missionaries in the country.

A representative of 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 and building clinics offering free medical and dental care in Asuncion.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In October, U.S. embassy officials met with VMW Director General Mendez to discuss government actions to facilitate the registration process, issues related to ICCAN's experiences in registering, 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.