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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Honduras

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions. Religious organizations may register as legal entities classified as religious associations and thereby acquire tax-exempt status and other government benefits.

In June, the Ministry of Education attempted to prohibit all religious activity in public schools, stating that all types of religious activity must be eliminated in official education training, workshops, and meetings in accordance with the constitution, which establishes all education must be secular. After facing public backlash, however, the Minister of Education fired the director of Educational Modalities and rescinded the director's letter that had stated the government would prohibit religious activity in schools. The minister stated that the government never enforced restrictions on religious activities in schools. Representatives of the Seventh-day Adventist Church continued to express concerns that some public and private universities did not grant students leave to observe their Sabbath on Saturday because Saturdays were part of the official work week. Some Seventh-day Adventist workers employed by both public and private companies in El Progreso and Yoro faced pressure to work during their Sabbath. Following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, however, some government officials made statements that were interpreted as antisemitic.

Muslim leaders reported difficulties in observing Friday prayers because Friday is a workday. Muslim leaders said there was an increase in hostile and aggressive language from those who self-identified as evangelical Protestants, including an uptick in derogatory remarks regarding the Muslim community and threats of violence. They indicated that while Muslim social media networks were targets of hate speech and threats, the community had the opportunity to engage in positive interreligious dialogue with members of different religious groups in the country.

U.S. embassy officials met with the Ministries of Human Rights and Foreign Relations and the autonomous National Commission of Human Rights (CONADEH) to discuss issues of religious freedom, including the importance of respect for minority religious groups. In July, the Ambassador met with the new Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Jose Vicente Nacher, and a senior embassy official also hosted a March meeting on religious freedom with representatives of the Catholic Church during the visit of the U.S. Special Presidential Advisor for the Americas. Embassy officials engaged with religious leaders and other members of a wide range of religious communities throughout the country, including in Comayagua, El Progreso, Choluteca, and San Pedro Sula. The embassy used social media platforms and its website to highlight religious freedom and frame the issue as a fundamental right for a strong democracy.

Section I.

Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.4 million (midyear 2023). According to a CID Gallup poll released in 2020, 48 percent of the population identifies as evangelical Protestant and 34 percent as Roman Catholic. Catholic Church officials, however, state that 75 percent of the population is Catholic. The Evangelical Alliance of Honduras estimates three million persons identify as evangelical, approximately 32 percent of the population. Other religious groups, each representing less than 5 percent of the population, include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Episcopalians, Lutherans, the Antiochian Orthodox Apostolic Catholic Church, Muslims, Jews, Baha'is, the Moravian Church, and several Anabaptist and Mennonite groups. Evangelical Protestant churches include the Church of God, Assemblies of God, Abundant Life Church, Living Love Church, International Christian Center, and various Great Commission churches. Several evangelical Protestant churches have no denominational affiliation. The Moravian Church has a broad presence in the La Mosquitia Region in the eastern part of the country. Some Indigenous and Afro-

descendent groups practice African and Amerindian faiths or incorporate elements of Christianity and African and Amerindian religions into syncretic religious practices and beliefs.

According to a representative of the Seventh-day Adventist Association, the group has approximately 75,000 members. The Jehovah's Witnesses community states it has approximately 23,000 members. The Church of Jesus Christ states it has approximately 118,000 members. The Muslim community states it has approximately 8,000 members, mostly Sunni; approximately 99 percent are converts. The Antiochian Orthodox Apostolic Catholic community has approximately 5,000 members. The Baha'i Faith community counts 891 members. The Jewish community estimates it has 120 members.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution provides for the free exercise of all religions as long as that exercise does not contravene other laws or public order. The constitution prohibits religious leaders from holding public office or making political statements.

Religious organizations may register as legal entities, classified as religious associations. Organizations seeking status as a legal entity must apply to the Ministry of Governance, Justice, and Decentralization and provide information on their internal organization, bylaws, and goals. Approved organizations must submit annual financial and activity reports to the government to remain registered. They may apply to the Ministry of Finance to receive benefits, such as tax exemptions and customs duty waivers. Unregistered religious organizations do not receive tax-exempt status. The official nongovernmental and religious organization registry office – the Directorate of Regulation, Registration, and Monitoring of Civil Associations (DIRRSAC) – is located within the Ministry of Governance, Justice, and Decentralization.

The National Human Rights Commission in Honduras (CONADEH) is a semiautonomous commission for human rights, in charge of investigating complaints of human rights abuses. It is generally considered an independent body, and not part of civil society.

The law criminalizes discrimination based on religion and includes crimes committed against individuals because of their religion as aggravating circumstances that may increase penalties

for criminal offenses.

The constitution states public education is secular and allows for the establishment of private schools, including schools run by religious organizations. Public schools do not teach religion; however, private schools may include religion as part of the curriculum. Various religious organizations, including the Catholic Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and evangelical Protestant churches, operate schools. Parents have the right to choose the kind of education their children receive, including religious education. The government dictates a minimum standardized curriculum for all schools. Some religiously affiliated schools require participation of all students, regardless of religious affiliation, in religious studies classes or events to graduate.

The government requires foreign missionaries to obtain entry and residence permits and mandates that a local institution or individual must sponsor a missionary's application for residency and submit it to immigration authorities. The government has agreements with the Evangelical Fellowship of Missionaries and Ministries of Honduras, Church of Jesus Christ, and Seventh-day Adventists, among others, to facilitate entry and residence permits for their missionaries. Groups with which the government does not have a written agreement are required to provide proof of employment and income for their missionaries.

Foreign religious workers may request residency for up to five years. To renew their residence permits, religious workers must submit proof of continued employment with the sponsoring religious group at least 30 days before their residency expires. According to immigration law, individuals who "fraudulently exercise their religious profession or office or commit fraud against the health or religious beliefs of citizens of the country, or the national patrimony" may be fined or face other legal consequences.

The criminal code protects clergy authorized to operate in the country from being required by a court or the attorney general's office to testify regarding privileged information obtained in confidence during a religious confession. The law does not require vicars, bishops, and archbishops of the Catholic Church and comparably ranked individuals from other legally recognized religious groups to appear in court if subpoenaed. They are required, however, to make a statement at a location of their choosing.

The official regulations for the penal system state that penitentiaries must guarantee the free exercise of religion without preference for one specific religion, so long as the worship is not against the law or public order. Prisoners have access to religious counseling from leaders of their faith.

While the government authorizes clergy from all religious groups to conduct marriage ceremonies, by law it recognizes only civil marriages conducted by the municipal mayor or notary public who are authorized to perform marriage ceremonies.

The official work week is Monday to Saturday, with no exceptions for religious groups that celebrate Friday or Saturday as their Sabbath.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

During the year, the DIRRSAC registered 103 religious associations, mostly evangelical Protestant churches, compared with 54 associations registered in 2022. Among those registered were Iglesia de Cristo Bethel in El Progreso, Yoro; Ministerio Internacional el Israel de Dios in San Pedro Sula; and Iglesia Central de Adoracion Casa del Espiritu Santo in Tocoa, Colon.

CONADEH reported it received two registered complaints regarding religious freedom during the year. A man from Santa Barbara Department said unknown assailants beat and threatened him for preaching. The father of a 14-year-old girl in Olancho Department filed a complaint that her school did not respect her religious beliefs by forcing her to participate in physical activities in certain clothing.

In June, the Ministry of Education prohibited religious activity in public schools. The ministry stated in an official letter that all types of religious activity must be eliminated in official education training, workshops, and meetings, in accordance with the Fundamental Law on Education that establishes all public school education must be secular. After facing public backlash, the Minister of Education fired the director of Educational Modalities, Ilich Valladares, and rescinded the letter, stating the government would not prohibit religious activity in schools. The minister stated that the government had never enforced any restrictions on religious activities in schools.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church continued to express concern that some institutions of higher education, both public and private, did not grant students leave to observe their Sabbath on Saturday because Saturdays were part of the official work week. It said the Supreme Court ruled favorably in 2019 on a constitutional challenge that Seventh-day Adventist students filed in 2015 seeking alternatives to taking classes or exams on Saturdays, but certain universities did not respect that ruling, nor did the government enforce it.

Some Seventh-day Adventist workers employed by both public and private companies in El Progreso and Yoro said they faced pressure to work during their Sabbath.

Following Hamas' October 7 terrorist attack on Israel and Israel's subsequent military response against Hamas in Gaza, there was an increase in antisemitic statements against Jews and Israel. On October 13, a government official called Israel's actions a "genocide that Zionism executes against the Palestinian people." On October 14, a different government official accused the Israeli army of "carrying out ethnic cleansing, clearly a terrorist act...and a vile campaign of propaganda and lies in the purest Nazi style." According to media reports, members of the Jewish community condemned the government's temporary closure of the country's embassy in Jerusalem, calling it a "disloyal act by the Foreign Ministry."

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Muslim leaders reported difficulties in observing Friday prayers because Friday is a workday.

Muslim community representatives reported an increase in hostile and aggressive attitudes from members of the evangelical Protestant community in messages on social media, which included threatening violence against Muslims and their places of worship. They also reported that the Muslim community had the opportunity to engage in positive interreligious dialogue with members of different religious groups in the country.

Seventh-day Adventists continued to report the refusal of certain private institutions, including places of employment and schools, to permit them to observe Saturday as their Sabbath.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials met with officials of the Ministry of Human Rights, the Ministry of Foreign Relations, and CONADEH to discuss issues of religious freedom, including the importance of respect for minority religious groups. In July, the Ambassador met with the new Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Jose Vicente Nacher, and raised the importance of religious freedom as a fundamental right. A senior embassy official also hosted a March meeting on religious freedom with representatives of the Catholic Church during the visit of the U.S.

Special Presidential Advisor for the Americas. In June, the Ambassador met the Bishop of Danli, Jose Canales, and discussed the importance of religious freedom, the Catholic Church's views on irregular migration, among other topics. Embassy officials engaged with religious leaders and other members of a wide range of religious communities throughout the country, including outreach in Comayagua, El Progreso, Choluteca, and San Pedro Sula. In November, the embassy hosted a roundtable event on religious freedom and related topics with leaders from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Roman Catholic Church, Confraternidad Evangelica, and Foro Intereclesiastico de Honduras.

The embassy used social media platforms and its website to highlight local engagement and Department of State messages on religious freedom. Topics included posts on Holocaust Remembrance Day, the embassy's celebration of Jewish American Heritage Month, the importance of combating antisemitism and anti-Muslim sentiment, embassy participation in an interfaith roundtable, and the U.S. government's commitment to supporting international religious freedom as a fundamental human right. The embassy also used social media to highlight the Ambassador's meetings with religious leaders, such as Archbishop Nacher, and to frame religious freedom as a fundamental right for a strong democracy.

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