

BOLIVIA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

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. COVID-19 restrictions led to administrative delays in implementing and enforcing a 2019 religious freedom law that created a clear distinction between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious organizations, although government officials reported that the registration processing of religious groups had fully resumed by midyear. In September, some evangelical Protestant leaders publicly opposed the government’s efforts to vaccinate the population against COVID-19. Evangelical Protestant community representatives again reported several smaller religious communities with “house churches” preferred not to register their organizations because they did not want to provide the government access to private internal information. On March 13, Roman Catholic bishops released a statement after authorities detained former interim president Jeanine Anez and accused her of promoting a coup against her predecessor, Evo Morales. In their statement, the bishops said that “politics of revenge” and a justice system aligned with the ruling political power “do not create confidence in the people.” In July, a Catholic Church official said the government’s public attacks against the Church created a hostile atmosphere that affected the perception many youths had of the Church. The official said the government was delaying international clothing donations in customs and increasing the difficulty of obtaining documentation for missionaries. On September 23, President Luis Arce delivered a speech at the UN General Assembly in which he accused the Catholic hierarchy of “participating in the breakdown of [Bolivia’s] constitutional order.” On October 29, the government ombudsman reportedly led a march to the headquarters of the Episcopal Conference of Bolivia (BEC), representing Catholic bishops, where some protestors vandalized the premises with anti-Catholic slogans.

According to media, on October 31, groups supporting a right to abortion interrupted a Mass at the San Francisco Basilica and the San Miguel Church in La Paz and at the San Lorenzo the Martyr Cathedral in Santa Cruz, spray-painting the latter with red paint. The activists criticized the Catholic Church in Santa Cruz for encouraging an 11-year-old pregnant girl, reportedly raped by a family member, to refuse to terminate the pregnancy. In November, media reported a confrontation

between a group of pro-abortion rights protesters and a group attempting to protect the Maria Auxiliadora Church in La Paz.

In November, embassy representatives met with Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) officials to discuss the challenges related to COVID-19 restrictions and their impact on religious freedom and the status of implementation of the religious freedom law. Embassy staff regularly engaged religious leaders to underscore the importance of religious freedom. The Charge d’Affaires met with religious leaders in October, including representatives from Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, and Jewish groups, to encourage religious leaders to engage in interfaith dialogue, discuss the impact of COVID-19 in their communities, and hear their views on the current state of religious freedom. Embassy officials met on other occasions with representatives from Muslim, evangelical Protestant, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Mennonite, and Catholic groups to discuss the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on their congregations and their relationships with the government.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.8 million (midyear 2021). According to U.S. government figures, 77 percent of the population identifies as Catholic and 16 percent as Protestant, including evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal groups. According to the local leader of the Church of Jesus Christ, approximately 300,000 followers reside in the country; the Church of Jesus Christ’s central website estimates more than 200,000 followers. Approximately 5 percent of the population identifies with smaller religious groups, and 5 percent self-identify as nonbelievers. There are approximately 1,500 Muslims and 450 Jews, according to leaders of the respective faiths and news reports. Approximately 60,000 Mennonites live in the lowlands province of Santa Cruz, according to community leaders. 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, 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 access to educational institutions, health services, and employment, and 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 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 their use of 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 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 submit 14 documentary requirements to register with the government. These include notarized legal documents, including statutes, internal regulations and procedures; rental agreement documents, utility invoices for the place(s) of worship, and a site map; detailed information on board members and legal representatives, including criminal background checks; an INTERPOL certificate for foreigners; proof of fiscal solvency; 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/or foreign.

The requirements for classification as a spiritual organization or religious organization vary slightly, but the government requires essentially the same type of information from both spiritual and religious entities. 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, and whose purpose does not pursue profit.

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.

A 2017 regulation requires religious and spiritual groups to reregister their operating licenses to ensure all documents list the official name of the country as "Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia." Reregistration also requires any amendments to organizations' bylaws to conform to all new national laws. Religious and spiritual groups were required to comply with these new registration requirements by the end of 2019.

The fees to obtain an operating license differ between "Religious Organizations" and "Spiritual Organizations," with costs of 6,780 bolivianos (\$990) and 4,068 bolivianos (\$600), respectively.

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 with 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 Political and Civil Rights.

Government Practices

Religious leaders and sources in the MFA reported the government had not completely implemented or enforced the religious freedom law that was passed in 2019, particularly aspects pertaining to the registration requirement, due to the political fluidity in the country and prolonged restrictions related to COVID-19.

Members of the evangelical Protestant community continued to say several smaller religious communities 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 with access to internal information. Sources stated these unregistered groups still 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, there were approximately 648 registered groups listed under the requirements of the religious freedom law, compared with 440 groups in 2020, and an additional 75 groups with a registration request in process with the MFA. According to religious leaders, nearly all known religious or spiritual organizations that wished to register with the government had complied with the requirements. Religious groups said the registration process generally took four to six months to complete. In November, MFA officials stated they were working on a system to digitize the registration process to reduce the timeline to one to two months and planned to have the new digital system complete by 2022.

According to press reports in September, evangelical Protestant pastor Luis Aruquipa objected to government efforts to vaccinate the population against COVID-19, stating, "We are against being forced to vaccinate. You have to leave it to free will." He also quoted a passage from Psalm 119:45: "I will walk in freedom, for I have devoted myself to your commandments."

In September, evangelical Protestant leaders said they were upset with Vice President David Choquehuanca for "corrupting" the evangelical faith. They said Choquehuanca, who was raised in the faith, used his office to promote a syncretic religion that amalgamates indigenous rituals and evangelical Protestant beliefs.

According to Catholic Church leaders, the government increasingly pressured the Church due to its role in mediating the presidential succession in 2019, when post-electoral unrest led to the resignation of then-president Evo Morales. Catholic leaders said that the government's public verbal attacks created a hostile atmosphere that affected the perception that many youths had of the Church. Catholic leaders also said the government was delaying international clothing donations and increasing the difficulty of obtaining documentation for incoming missionaries.

On March 13, the BEC released a statement hours after authorities detained former interim president Anez. In their statement, the bishops said that “politics of revenge” and a justice system aligned with the ruling political power “do not create confidence in the people.” The bishops released their message by video, with conference president Bishop Ricardo Centellas reading from a prepared text: “We cannot remain passive while citizens who have served Bolivia, [albeit] with their limitations, are persecuted.”

On August 25, the BEC issued a press statement expressing concern “over the deplorable human rights situation” in the country and “the manipulation of the judicial system by those at the top of the state,” and calling for a summit on justice reform. A Catholic Church representative stated that a few days after the statement was issued, he was summoned by high-ranking government officials who threatened him and ordered him to stop meddling in politics.

On September 23, President Arce delivered a speech at the UN General Assembly, in which he accused the Catholic hierarchy of “participating in the breakdown of [the country’s] constitutional order.” While avoiding a specific response to the President’s speech, the leader of the BEC made a November 14 public statement that criticized “threats and words that incite violence” and called for an inclusive, peaceful dialogue that seeks justice and peace in the country.

According to media, on October 29, the government’s ombudsman, Nadia Cruz, and other officials led a march to the BEC’s headquarters, where some protestors vandalized the premises with slogans, including, “They are not pro-life, they are pro-rape” and “rapists and perverse priests.” The protestors were reportedly protesting what they characterized as the meddling of the Catholic Church in convincing an 11-year-old pregnant rape victim not to abort.

Police and media reported the explosion of a crude bomb near the entrance of the La Paz BEC headquarters in the early morning hours of November 24. The explosion caused material damage to the structure but did not result in any injuries. While there was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, many believed the incident was related to the case of the 11-year-old pregnant rape victim. Minister of Government Eduardo del Castillo reported that police had identified two women allegedly responsible for the attack but did not provide any more information, citing the confidential nature of the ongoing investigation.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to media, on October 31, groups in favor of abortion interrupted a Mass at the San Francisco Basilica and San Miguel Church in La Paz and at the San Lorenzo the Martyr Cathedral in Santa Cruz, spray painting the latter with red paint. The activists were demonstrating on behalf of the 11-year-old pregnant rape victim. “From the point of view of our faith, there’s an absolute conviction to protect life,” Susana Inch, legal counsel for the BEC, said. “Even when there’s an instance of sexual violence, even when there’s a high-risk pregnancy, even when everything is unfavorable, the conviction is to protect and save that life under any circumstance.” A representative of the Archdiocese of Santa Cruz condemned the attacks on the Catholic Church and its buildings.

Media reported a November 25 incident in which a group of pro-abortion rights protesters confronted a group attempting to protect the Maria Auxiliadora Church in La Paz. The protesters threw buckets of paint, feces, and other objects at the group protecting the church.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In November, embassy representatives met with MFA officials to discuss the challenges related to COVID-19 restrictions and their impact on religious freedom and the status of implementation of the new religious freedom law.

Embassy representatives regularly engaged religious leaders to underscore the importance of tolerance and religious freedom. In October, the Charge d’Affaires met with religious leaders from the evangelical Protestant, Muslim, Catholic, and Jewish communities to discuss religious freedom issues, including the religious freedom law, and to encourage religious leaders to engage in interfaith dialogue. Throughout the year, embassy officials met individually with leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ, and evangelical Protestant, Catholic, Mennonite, and Muslim groups to discuss the impact of the implementation of the religious freedom law, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their communities, and their relationships with the government under the leadership of President Arce.

The embassy posted traditional greetings for Hannukah and Christmas on its Facebook page.