

# **BOLIVIA 2022 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.

Reportedly, administrative and COVID-19 delays slowed the implementation and enforcement of a 2019 religious freedom law that created a clear distinction between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious organizations. According to media outlets, Roman Catholic bishops advocated for including the question of religious identity in the national census, which the government opposed. On December 2, the government instituted a census law and announced the census would be held in March 2024. The law did not address whether religious identity would be included in the census.

In November, during the Bolivian Episcopal Conference (BEC) of Catholic Bishops’ annual assembly in Cochabamba, the bishops called for the cessation of societal tensions surrounding debates on the planned national census and for a national project that represents all sectors of society.

During the year, U.S. embassy officials were unable to meet with government officials to discuss religious freedom issues because the government said it considered the issue part of its “internal affairs.” Embassy representatives regularly engaged religious leaders to underscore the importance of religious tolerance and freedom. In September, the Chargé d’Affaires met with religious leaders from the evangelical Protestant, Sikh, Muslim, Catholic, and Jewish communities to discuss religious freedom issues and encourage religious leaders to engage in interfaith dialogue. Throughout the year, embassy officials, including the Chargé, met individually with leaders of the Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Mennonite communities to discuss the state of religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 12 million (midyear 2022). 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 the 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; 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. Approximately 70,000 Mennonites live in the lowland province of Santa Cruz, according to community leaders. There are approximately 1,500 Muslims and 450 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, as amended in 2009, 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 2009 constitution removed the Roman Catholic Church's previous status as the country's official 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 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 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 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.

The fees to obtain an operating license differ between “religious organizations” and “spiritual organizations” at costs of 6,780 bolivianos (\$990) and 4,068 bolivianos (\$590), 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 other sources said 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 administrative delays and 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 680 registered groups listed under the requirements of the religious freedom law, compared with 648 groups in 2021, and an additional 40 groups with a registration request in process with the MFA.

Religious groups said the registration process generally took four to six months to complete, and most organizations complied with the registration requirement. In November 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, the government had not completed the process by year's end.

During the year, Catholic leaders reported that despite political differences between the government and the church, the government refrained from issuing harsh statements against the church, which it had done in 2020 and 2021.

According to media reports, Catholic bishops advocated for including the question of religious identity in the national census, which the government opposed. BEC leadership said that excluding information on religious affiliation in the census violated the constitution because individuals had the right to be educated in accordance with their faith. A June BEC statement said, "As [the] Catholic Church, we once again ask that the question about the religion that each person professes be included." The BEC called for "a transparent and inclusive census." During Mass in late October, the Archbishop of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Rene Leigue Cesari, urged both the government and the political opposition to resolve their differences regarding the scheduled date of the national census. Following Mass, the Archbishop and other clergy led a procession through the streets of Santa Cruz calling for peace. On December 2, the government instituted a census law and announced the census would be held in March 2024. The law did not address whether religious identity would be included in the census.

In February, the BEC called for the government to provide medical care and a fair trial to former Interim President Añez, then in pretrial detention, and, in October, commented on the "poor state" of the justice system and democratic backsliding. The government did not respond to the BEC's statements.

According to one evangelical Protestant leader, his group prioritized engaging the government not to force doctors to perform abortions if doing so violated their religious beliefs.

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

In November, during the BEC's annual assembly in Cochabamba, the Catholic bishops called for the cessation of societal tensions surrounding debates on the planned national census and for a national project that represents all sectors of society. BEC President Pesoa, also the Apostolic Vicar of El Beni, stated, "The bishops of Bolivia call on all the Bolivian people, in the face of everything we are experiencing, in the face of the conflict that threatens us all, in the face of hatred, resentment, or intolerance that grows and that takes over our streets ... We call for sanity and for a sincere and fraternal dialogue in which we put aside hidden and irrational interests and sit down with a true and sincere desire to solve problems in a spirit of peace, understanding, and serene fraternity."

The Catholic Church remained involved in projects to help the poor, especially operating temporary shelters, including the shelter Casa de Acogida Julio Terrazas for migrants and victims of trafficking, as well as providing educational services. The church provided the assistance regardless of the religion of the individuals it served.

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

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

Embassy representatives regularly engaged religious leaders to underscore the importance of religious tolerance and freedom. In September, the Chargé met with religious leaders from the evangelical Protestant, Sikh, Muslim, Catholic, and Jewish communities to discuss religious freedom issues and encourage religious leaders to engage in interfaith dialogue. Throughout the year, embassy officials, including the Chargé, met individually with leaders of the Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Mennonite communities to discuss the state of religious freedom.

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