

# GUATEMALA 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including freedom of worship and the free expression of all beliefs. The constitution recognizes the distinct legal personality of the Roman Catholic Church. Non-Catholic religious groups must register with the Ministry of Interior to enter into contracts or receive tax-exempt status, after following a process involving several steps that could take up to two years and cost approximately 10,000 quetzals (\$1,300).

Religious leaders reported that in May in Chichipate, Izabal Department, members of the local community government unlawfully detained Mayan spiritual guide Adela Choc Cruz and her adult daughter, Sandra Tec Choc, and threatened to burn Adela alive for committing acts of witchcraft against the child of a local evangelical Christian leader. In July, President Alejandro Giammattei established through a government agreement the Presidential Commission on Religious Liberty, appointing as its commissioner Robin García, an evangelical Christian pastor. According to García, the commissioner served as a conduit between the President and representatives from a diverse array of registered religious groups. In September, García arranged for the Ministry of Government's Office of the Registry of Legal Entities (RENAP) to open a special service window for religious institutions to facilitate their legal registrations and help their leaders file paperwork. Non-Catholic groups stated that some municipal authorities in rural areas continued to discriminate against them in processing building permits and in local tax collection.

Mayan spiritual guides and practitioners reported continued societal discrimination and harassment, including accusations of witchcraft. They also reported that some evangelical Christian congregations created obstacles restricting the ability of Mayan practitioners to worship, including in Guatemala City and Santa Lucía Utatlán, Sololá Department. Some Catholic clergy said they continued to receive anonymous threats, mostly on social media, because of their association with environmental protection, anticorruption, and human rights work.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly engaged with government officials, religious groups, and civil society organizations to discuss issues of religious freedom. In his meetings with representatives of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and other faith traditions, the Ambassador reiterated the U.S. government's dedication to freedom of religion or belief. The Ambassador met multiple times with Indigenous authorities and attended public events during which Mayan spiritual practitioners shared sacred practices and carried out sacred ceremonies. Embassy officials emphasized the value of tolerance and respect for religious diversity, including for religious minorities, in meetings with members of religious and various civil society groups. They also underscored the need to denounce and prevent violence against Mayan spiritual practitioners. The Ambassador hosted interreligious community leaders, the country's human rights ombudsman, and the presidential commissioner on religious liberty to discuss antisemitism and opportunities to increase intercommunity dialogue.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 17.7 million (midyear 2022). According to a 2016 survey by ProDatos, approximately 45 percent of the population is Catholic, and 42 percent is non-Catholic Christian. Approximately 11 percent of the population professes no religious affiliation. Groups together constituting approximately 2 percent of the population include Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and spiritual practitioners of Mayan, Xinca, and Afro-Indigenous Garifuna communities.

Non-Catholic Christian groups include the Full Gospel Church, Assemblies of God, Central American Church, Prince of Peace Church, independent evangelical Protestant groups, Baptists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Mennonites, Episcopalians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Russian Orthodox, and Seventh-day Adventists. According to representatives from the Catholic Church and the Church of Jesus Christ, evangelical Christianity is growing, and while there is no central leadership, the Evangelical Alliance comprises approximately 67 percent of the country's evangelical Christian congregations.

Catholics and Protestants are present throughout the country, with adherents drawn from all majority ethnic groups. According to leaders of Mayan spiritual organizations, as well as Catholic and Protestant clergy, many Indigenous Catholics and some Indigenous Protestants also blend Indigenous spiritual traditions with Catholic or Protestant practices, mainly in the eastern city of Livingston and in the southern region of the country. In the Western Highlands, syncretic practices are also prevalent.

According to Buddhist community representatives, there are between 8,000 and 11,000 Buddhists, composed principally of individuals from the Chinese immigrant community. Muslim leaders state there are approximately 2,000 Muslims of mostly Palestinian origin, who reside primarily in Guatemala City. According to local Ahmadi Muslims, there is a small Ahmadiyya Muslim community of approximately 70 members. According to Jewish community leadership, approximately 1,000 Jewish families live in the country.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of expression and freedom of religion, stating, “Every person has the right to practice their religion or belief in public within the limits of public order and the respect due to the beliefs of other creeds.” The constitution recognizes the distinct legal personality of the Catholic Church and the government has a concordat with the Holy See.

The constitution does not require religious groups to register for the purpose of worship, but groups seeking to obtain tax-exempt status or to enter into contracts must register with the government. The Catholic Church receives these benefits without the requirement to register. To register, a religious group must file with the Ministry of Interior a copy of its bylaws, evidence that it is a newly established legal entity that intends to pursue religious objectives, and a list of its initial membership with at least 25 members. The ministry may reject a registration application if it believes the group does not appear to be devoted to a religious objective, appears intent on undertaking illegal activities, or engages in activities that could threaten public order. Most applications are approved after a lengthy process. All religious groups must obtain the permission of the respective

municipal authorities for construction and repair of properties and for holding public events, consistent with requirements for nonreligious endeavors.

The constitution protects the rights of Indigenous groups to practice their traditions and forms of cultural expression, including spiritual practices. The law permits Mayan spiritual groups to conduct ceremonies at Mayan historical sites on government-owned property free of charge with written permission from the Ministry of Culture. Anyone seeking access to the sites located in national parks or other protected areas, however, is required to pay processing or entrance fees.

The criminal code penalizes with one-month to one-year prison sentences the interruption of religious celebrations, “offending” a religion, which the law leaves vague, and the desecration of burial sites or human remains; however, charges are seldom filed under these laws.

According to the constitution, no member of the clergy of any religion may serve in the government as president, vice president, government minister, tax superintendent or part of the Tax Authority Directory, judge, or magistrate.

The law provides for at least one “religious space, according to [the prison’s] capacity,” in each prison. Chaplain services are limited to Catholic chaplains and nondenominational (usually evangelical) Protestant chaplains. The law does not specify that access must be provided for prisoners of minority religious groups to spiritual counselors from their faith.

The constitution permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools. There is no national framework for determining the nature or content of religious instruction. In general, public schools have no religious component in the curriculum. Private religious schools are permitted and are found in all areas of the country. Religious instruction is allowed, but attendance is optional in private religious schools.

The government requires foreign missionaries to obtain tourist visas to enter the country; visas are renewable every three months. After renewing their tourist visas once, foreign missionaries may apply for temporary residence for up to two years; the residential permit is renewable.

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

### **Government Practices**

According to media reports and Mayan spiritual leaders, antagonism in the interior of the country between Indigenous evangelical Christian groups and Indigenous spiritual practitioners of Mayan communities continued, with a local government entity involved in one instance. Religious leaders reported that on May 16, in Chichipate, Izabal Department, members of the local community government unlawfully detained Mayan spiritual guide Adela Choc Cruz and her adult daughter, Sandra Tec Choc, and threatened to burn Adela alive for allegedly committing acts of witchcraft against the child of a local evangelical Christian leader. According to reports, community members burned Adela's house and warded off police officers who attempted to free her and prevent the destruction of Adela's house. As of year's end, neither the Public Ministry nor police had investigated the case nor arrested or brought charges against those accused of making the threats nor those who set fire to Adela's house and detained her.

On July 1, President Giammattei established through an executive agreement the Presidential Commission on Religious Liberty and appointed as its commissioner García, an evangelical Christian pastor in Antigua. García said the commissioner served as a conduit between the President and representatives of registered religious groups across a broad spectrum of faiths. As of year's end, the commission consisted of one individual, the commissioner. García said in his role as commissioner, he met with faith actors several times during the year through a series of roundtables. Some faith actors said they believed the commission should invite Mayan Cosmovision representatives to be fully inclusive and representative of the country's society. The commissioner reportedly did not include Mayan groups because they were not registered as religious groups.

According to representatives of various faiths attending the commission's meetings, García and Giammattei acted on some of the concerns raised by members of the religious community. A representative of the Jewish community who attended the meetings said the commissioner cleared bureaucratic steps needed to repair damage to a wall in a Jewish cemetery that had fallen three years previously. The cemetery is part of national patrimony and an historic site. At a July meeting of the commission, Giammattei reportedly directed the Ministry

of Culture to work directly with the commissioner to ease bureaucratic hurdles and to advise community leaders on what was needed to quickly receive permits needed for repairs to religious sites.

Similarly, Muslim community representatives reported that in October, the commission held a working level meeting with the Ministry of Government to help Muslim and Church of Jesus Christ leaders understand the regulations and requirements for applying for visas for missionaries to enter the country and to render assistance in expediting these processes within the limits of the law.

According to evangelical Protestant groups, non-Catholic religious groups continued to have to follow a vaguely defined process involving several steps that could take up to two years and cost approximately 10,000 quetzals (\$1,300) to register with the Ministry of Interior and be able to enter into contracts or receive tax-exempt status. In September, Presidential Commissioner on Religious Liberty García arranged for RENAP to open a special service window for religious institutions to facilitate their registrations and help their leaders file their paperwork.

The passage of a law on sacred sites, which the Committee on the Designation of Sacred Sites (COLUSAG) submitted to Congress in 2009, remained pending. According to a Mayan spiritual leader involved in drafting the bill, if passed, the resulting law would provide legally protected status for Mayan spiritual sites, making it a crime to damage or remove spiritual objects from them. The law would also establish a national council with legal authority to name holy sites and credential Mayan spiritual practitioners for the purposes of granting them access to protected sites.

Some Mayan leaders again said the government limited their access to several religious sites on government-owned property and required them to pay to access the sites, even though the Ministry of Culture offered free access to credentialed Mayan spiritual practitioners. The same leaders said credentials were not given in a timely manner to all practitioners who wished to access the sites. The government continued to state there were no limitations on access; however, anyone seeking access to the sites located in national parks or other protected areas had to pay processing or entrance fees. In Tikal, a complex of Mayan pyramids dating from 200 A.D. and one of the most sacred sites for Mayan

spirituality, the access fee was approximately 20 to 30 quetzals (\$3 to \$4), which, according to members of COLUSAG, was prohibitive for many members of Indigenous communities.

During the year, authorities released three members of the Mayan community of Chicoyogüito and placed them under house arrest pending trial, following their arrest in 2021 for attempted trespassing on land Mayans stated included sacred spiritual sites. Eighteen other members of the Mayan community remained in jail, and all awaited trial as of year's end. The court did not express a reason why some were given house arrest and others not. According to local sources, the three individuals were squatters who intended to parcel and sell the land, and their claim to the land was based on ancestral right to land and not based on spiritual practice.

According to the Guatemalan Interreligious Dialogue, an interfaith group with representatives of the Catholic Church, evangelical Protestant churches, the Church of Jesus Christ, Mayan spiritual practitioners, and Muslim, Buddhist, and Jewish groups, some municipal authorities in rural areas continued to discriminate against non-Catholic groups in processing building permit approvals and in local tax collection.

In May, Congress held the second of three required readings on a bill that sought to privatize the ownership of sacred and archeological sites of Mayan spiritual significance and cultural history in order to commercialize access and use of those sites. On May 18, some Mayan spiritual groups and Indigenous ancestral authority groups from the interior of the country protested the bill, marching on Congress and demanding an audience with the President of Congress, Shirley Rivera. The same day, Rivera agreed to withdraw the bill temporarily in response to the protests. As of year's end, Congress had not resumed consideration of the bill.

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

Mayan spiritual leaders reported continued societal discrimination. For example, according to these leaders, an evangelical Christian leader who gave sermons on a local radio station in El Estor, Izabal Department, called Mayan spiritual practice witchcraft various times in her sermons, which some followers in the local

government said was their justification for detaining and threatening a Mayan spiritual leader on May 19.

Mayan spiritual practitioners continued to report that some evangelical Christian leaders created obstacles to restrict Mayan spiritual practitioners' ability to worship. According to one Mayan spiritual leader, the leader of an evangelical Christian parish in Guatemala City directed his practitioners to block access to sacred sites under trees in the area for the express purpose of deterring Mayan sacred and spiritual practices and converting those who follow Mayan spirituality and way of life to evangelical Christianity. On September 29, in Santa Lucía Utatlán, Sololá Department, a Mayan Cosmovision practitioner led a small group of individuals to place flowers and other offerings near a sacred space next to some trees but said evangelical Christians blocked them from making the offerings. Other Mayan spiritual practitioners said they found signs saying that Maya are witches and that their practice is the work of the devil.

According to both Mayan spiritual guides and local Catholic leaders in the country's interior, among majority Catholic areas in the interior, local residents sometimes blended Catholic and Mayan sacred traditions and practices. A local Catholic priest said there were places in Chichicastenango, Quiché Department, where members of communities both made offerings in the Mayan tradition at sacred natural sites and attended Catholic Mass. In other places in the country, some individuals did not respect the blending of different faith traditions and spiritual practices. For example, a local Mayan spiritual practitioner and guide said that in Momostenango, Totonicopán Department, Catholic parishioners physically occupied Mayan sacred sites to block the placing of ceremonial offerings by Mayan spiritual practitioners, and they often told those Mayan spiritual practitioners that they should have converted away from "old" religions.

A leading Mayan spiritual practitioner said that because Mayan spirituality considers natural places and objects, such as a spot next to a rock or a tree or a mountain top, that are often located in public areas to be sacred, groups opposing the spiritual practices often congregated in those areas when Mayan spiritual leaders would conduct sacred ceremonies, effectively suppressing the practices without appearing to intentionally do so.



Some Catholic clergy continued to report receiving online threats and harassment targeting them because of their association with environmental protection, anticorruption, and human rights work. For example, on October 3-4, Cardinal Alvaro Ramazzini used social media to launch a civic network to support transparency and good governance. He subsequently became the target of threats posted online. Some Catholic clergy reported they continued to receive anonymous threats, mostly on social media, because of the church's support for transitional justice cases stemming from civil war-era military abuses of Indigenous populations.

According to law enforcement professionals working in the penal system, gang members often converted to evangelical Christianity in prison as an alternative to gangs and as an option to safely leave gangs; unless a gang member converted before leaving a gang, the gang would likely kill him or her for attempting to leave. Community evangelical leaders who visited prisons to provide aid and incarcerated religious community leaders who guided spiritual practices in prison conducted the conversions.

Mayan spiritual groups again reported that some landowners denied access to locations on private property that Mayans consider sacred, including caves, lagoons, mountains, and forests. According to one Mayan source, there was no recourse available through the government for Mayans to obtain access to these private lands to perform rituals and leave offerings.

According to Religions for Peace (RFP), an international coalition whose local membership comprises representatives from the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Alliance, individual evangelical Christian churches, the Muslim and Jewish faiths, a Buddhist group, and Mayan spirituality groups, RFP continued to seek to resolve misunderstandings among religious groups and to promote a culture of respect. Some organizations, including the Municipal Indigenous Council in Sololá, which is an ancestral authority based on traditional Indigenous culture, rotated leadership between Catholic and Protestant representatives. Guardians of the Dignity of the State, an interfaith group with members from the Tibetan Buddhist, Protestant, and secular communities, continued to promote social activism and change, including working with Mayan spiritual leaders.

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

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials engaged regularly with the human rights ombudsman, officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and members of Congress to discuss religious freedom issues, including threats against religious leaders and access for Mayans practitioners to their spiritual sites. Embassy officials engaged government officials as well as religious leaders on the need to denounce violence against Mayan spiritual practitioners and members of all other faiths. The embassy continued to promote increased engagement between the government and Indigenous communities, especially through support for increased dialogue and government investment in Indigenous communities, thereby enabling them to freely practice their ancient traditions, including spiritual traditions, and express their culture.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials and representatives attended public Mayan spiritual ceremonies when meeting with Indigenous authorities. During a February visit to Tecpán, Chimaltenango Department, the Ambassador met with Indigenous leaders and participated in ceremonies, during which the Indigenous leaders shared Mayan spiritual traditions.

On December 13, the Ambassador hosted government human rights officials, the presidential commissioner on religious liberty, and religious and spiritual community leaders from Mayan communities, Christian groups, the Jewish community, and the Muslim community to discuss preventing antisemitism and to listen to a lecture on antisemitism presented by Marco Gonzalez, the director of Guatemala City's Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials regularly met with leaders of Catholic and other Christian religious groups in the country and representatives of faith-based organizations to discuss the importance of tolerance and respect for members of religious minority groups. During the year, the Ambassador met multiple times with leaders from diverse religious backgrounds to reiterate the U.S. government's dedication to freedom of religion or belief and discuss cooperation in supporting broader human rights in the country. Embassy officials worked with the Evangelical Alliance and representatives from the Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist communities to strengthen understanding of religious freedom issues and promote religious tolerance. The Ambassador and other embassy officials also engaged religious leaders in support of COVID-19

prevention, including the use of vaccinations, testing, and preventative hygiene practices in the face of rising numbers of cases during the year.