

An official website of the United States Government [Here's how you know](#)

🕒 **Live Now:** AGOA Private Sector Forum

U.S. DEPARTMENT *of* STATE



[Home](#) > ... > Paraguay

Paraguay

IN THIS SECTION / EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.”

The Vice Ministry of Worship (VMW), under the Ministry of Education and Science, continued to focus on raising public awareness of the registration law through local radio, social media, and maintaining a continuous dialogue with all religious institutions. While the VMW stated it implemented the registration law consistently across all groups, it continued to deny registration to the Catholic Christian Apostolic National Church of Paraguay (ICCAN). During the year, the VMW hosted a National Interreligious Symposium open to all religious groups with a presence in the country on multiple topics regarding family values. In October, President Santiago Pena presented his government’s program to the General Assembly of the Paraguayan Episcopal Conference. He spoke about the social situation of the most vulnerable sectors of society and called upon the religious community to assist those communities. In October, Roman Catholic Church leaders made public statements asking the government for a strong commitment to combat organized crime, drug-trafficking, and poverty and condemning government corruption.

Observers, including those from nongovernmental organizations, political commentators, leaders of different religious groups, and the press, continued to report that the Roman Catholic Church maintained an influential role within society. 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 a new medical oxygen generation plant and x-ray equipment valued at more than two million U.S. dollars to Barrio Obrero Public Hospital.

In November, U.S. embassy officials met with Vice Minister of Worship David Velazquez and VMW Director General Lizzie Miranda to discuss government actions to facilitate the registration process of religious groups, the promotion of religious freedom, interreligious dialogue, and the provision of state funding for salaries at schools run by religious groups. In September and October, the U.S. Ambassador held separate meetings with Archbishop of Asuncion Adalberto Martinez Flores and Jewish leaders, respectively, to discuss the need for acceptance of all cultures and religions.

Section I.

Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the country's total population at 7.4 million (midyear 2023). The VMW estimates 88 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 6 percent evangelical Protestant, while the Association of Evangelical Ministers of Paraguay estimates 9.6 percent of the population is 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 70,000 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 estimates 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 must comply with all regulations that 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). Religious groups that register are entitled to tax exemptions.

The VMW may apply monetary and nonmonetary administrative sanctions against organizations that fail to register, including ordering the suspension of religious services and a fine of 2,200,000 guaranies (\$300). 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 (\$61). 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 curriculum.

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, which must adhere to the national education curriculum, 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

The VMW continued to focus on raising public awareness of the registration law through local radio, social media, and maintaining a continuous dialogue with all religious institutions; it 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 49 new groups registered, bringing the total number of religious groups registered with the government to 670. According to the VMW, approximately 90 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. VMW officials acknowledged the barrier and stated they were working on building an online registration system that would include a payment platform. Members of the Church of Jesus Christ decided not to register because they found the government registration process too cumbersome.

The VMW continued to say it would be unable to approve ICCAN's registration due to the inclusion of "Catholic" in its title, which the VMW asserted resulted in ICCAN's name not being sufficiently distinguishable from the Roman Catholic Church. As of year's end, ICCAN had not filed a complaint against VMW's ruling.

In October, President Pena addressed the General Assembly of the Paraguayan Episcopal Conference where he presented his government's program to the church's leadership. He spoke about the social situation of the most vulnerable sectors of society, including Indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups, and requested their assistance in helping these communities. Roman Catholic Church leaders made public statements in October asking the government for a strong commitment to combat organized crime, drug-trafficking, and poverty. The leaders also made public statements condemning government corruption. Cardinal Martinez stated, "We must point out that corruption and impunity are structural realities in Paraguay and the church has been permanently engaged in denouncing them and proposing guidelines to overcome them."

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. On November 1, pro-government media outlet *La Nacion* reported, "The social concern of the Catholic Church is included in the government's agenda and is part of the work carried out by the government since the beginning of the administration. In this regard, one might say that there is total agreement on this topic. The National Government, although legally a secular entity, is linked to the Catholic Church by the religious faith of its main leaders including the President, and the majority of society. The government program is strongly humanistic and focuses mainly on improving the situation of the people through numerous projects, in line with the recommendations and requests of the Catholic Church."

The VMW reported the Ministry of Education continued to provide subsidies to schools of various religious affiliations. According to VMW representatives, the government continued providing subsidies to Mennonite schools. The ministry stated it distributed subsidies based primarily on the need to reach certain underserved communities, focusing especially on the underserved rural Chaco region, where Mennonites are prominent.

The ministry maintained an agreement with the Roman Catholic Church governing allocation of subsidies to schools in areas not served by public schools. The ministry continued to subsidize the salaries of hundreds of teachers in registered, nonprofit schools operated by predominantly Roman Catholic religious communities. The VMW also stated that a separate agreement set very similar regulations for subsidy allocation to other, non-Roman Catholic Church-affiliated religious schools located in underserved areas serving student populations and providing educational or scholarship services to students.

The government continued to support chaplaincy programs in the armed forces that were open to all religious groups. 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 and provide their services in prisons for both adults and youth. During the year, however, only Roman Catholic and Protestant groups used this option.

On June 30, the VMW hosted a National Interreligious Symposium open to all religious groups with a presence in the country, regardless of registration status, on the topic of "Education on Family Values." On December 1, the VMW hosted a second Symposium on the topic of "Values of Caring for the Elderly."

On August 15, following the presidential inauguration, the Roman Catholic Church hosted the *Te Deum* Mass, a traditional thanksgiving service to honor the incoming administration. President Pena, Vice-President Pedro Alliana, the incoming presidential cabinet, as well as foreign delegations and guests attended. During the service, Cardinal Martinez stated the Catholic Church would support all efforts that seek the common good, peace, and integral development of all Paraguayans. Martinez also said the new government must fight corruption, nepotism, bribery, fraud, and influence peddling.

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 call for the end of government corruption and impunity, and violence against women. Valenzuela called out government authorities for their lack of empathy towards the population and governing for their individual benefit.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Leaders in the Jewish community reported after the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack in Israel, the community increased security around the Jewish community center but did not report any specific incidents.

Observers, including those from nongovernmental organizations, political commentators, leaders of different religious groups, and the press, continued to report 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. 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 for purchase. Major private newspapers included weekly columns by Catholic priests and private television station NPY broadcast a daily mass from its studios. Other television channels transmitted both Catholic and Protestant services on Sundays.

The VMW reported 90 foreign missionaries registered or reregistered during the year, the same number as in 2022. Most missionaries were members of Roman Catholic and evangelical Protestant churches. The Church of Jesus Christ reported it had 300 foreign missionaries in the country, many of whom reported having to pay for their temporary residency permits due to not seeking registration.

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 a new medical oxygen generation plant and x-ray equipment valued at more than two million U.S. dollars to Barrio Obrero Public Hospital.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

In November, U.S. embassy officials met with Vice Minister of Worship Velazquez and VMW Director General Miranda 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.

In September and October, the Ambassador held separate meetings with Archbishop Martinez and Jewish leaders, respectively, to discuss the need for acceptance of all cultures and religions.

Throughout the year, embassy officials again 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.

TAGS

[Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs](#)

[Office of International Religious Freedom](#)

[Paraguay](#)

[Religious Freedom](#)

White House

USA.gov

Office of the Inspector General

Archives

Contact Us



[Privacy Policy](#)

[Accessibility Statement](#)

[Copyright Information](#)

[FOIA](#)

[No FEAR Act](#)