

BOLIVIA 2019 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. President Evo Morales resigned on November 10, following massive protests against what were widely considered fraudulent October 20 elections, with transitional President Jeanine Anez assuming power on November 12 until new elections, expected to take place in May 2020. According to some observers, both Morales and Anez used religious and spiritual symbolism that was exclusionary of other beliefs. In April then president Morales signed the Law of Religious Freedom, Religious Organizations and Spiritual Beliefs, which creates a clear distinction between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and religious organizations. Parts of the law were implemented by year’s end. 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 with access to private internal information.

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

U.S. embassy access to government officials under the Morales administration was limited despite embassy requests for meetings. The transitional government showed interest in engaging the U.S. government, although no discussions on religious freedom took place with embassy officials in the few weeks the transition government was in office before the end of the year. Embassy staff regularly met with religious leaders to underscore the importance of religious freedom. The Charge d’Affaires hosted an interfaith meeting for religious leaders in October, including representatives from Protestant and Jewish groups, and from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), to engage them in interfaith dialogue and discuss the new religious freedom bill. Embassy officials met on other occasions with representatives from Muslim, evangelical Protestant, and Roman Catholic groups to discuss new religious freedom legislation and other religious freedom topics.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 11.5 million (midyear 2019 estimate). 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 leader of the Church of Jesus Christ in La Paz, 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. 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 in 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 Freedom of Religion, Religious Organizations, and Spiritual Organizations Law, signed by then president Morales in April, and partially implemented by year's end, creates a clear distinction between NGOs and religious organizations. The law continues to require 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 they use 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. Until the complete regulations are published, the existing laws for registration and regulations remain in place.

The existing law requires religious or spiritual organizations to register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and inform the government of all financial, legal, social, and religious activities. It regulates religious or spiritual

organizations' finances and labor practices by requiring they use funds exclusively to achieve the organization's objectives, banning the distribution of money among members, subjecting all employees to national labor laws, and compelling them to pay taxes. Pursuant to a concordat with the Holy See, the Catholic Church is exempt from registration.

According to the MFA's Religion and Nongovernmental Organizations Office, religious organizations must fulfill 14 requirements to register their organization with the government. Organizations must submit their 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; and proof of fiscal solvency. They must also provide the 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 in order 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 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 statute; 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.

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.” Prior to this new requirement, organizations could carry an older version of licenses that listed the name of the state as “Republica de Bolivia.” Reregistration also requires any amendments to organizations’ bylaws to conform to all new national laws. Organizations 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 government reserves the right to revoke an organization’s operating permit for noncompliance with the registration requirements. The government may not deny legal recognition to any organization based on its articles of faith.

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

Following the resignation of former president Morales in November after massive protests against what were widely considered fraudulent October 20 elections and the installation of transitional President Anez, media reported some observers criticized Anez for taking the oath of office over a large Bible and using Catholic imagery, in contrast with Morales’ use of indigenous ceremonies. During the promulgation of the law for Freedom of Religion, Religious Organizations, and Spiritual Beliefs, media reports stated then president Morales “attacked” the Catholic Church, stating, “I am informed that a bishop from the city of Oruro celebrating Mass, said that Satan is in the [Presidential] Palace. I am not resentful, we forgive. I asked: Who is that Satan? Evo? Or the rites?”

According to leaders within the religious community, leaders from the Church of Jesus Christ and evangelical Protestants were involved in drafting the religious

freedom law. Media reported some nonevangelical Protestant churches viewed the new law as an interference by the state in the fundamental right to freedom of religion and an oversight of its economic resources. By year's end, the government had not issued specific regulations for all aspects of the new law that would detail how the government intended to implement it.

Members of the evangelical Protestant community again said several smaller religious communities had formed congregations that held services at unofficial worship locations and conducted other activities without registering. These 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 have 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 sources, however, the Morales administration did not interfere with these organizations despite their refusal to comply with the law.

According to the MFA's Office of Religion and Nongovernmental Organizations, there were 438 registered religious groups, an increase from 436 in 2018, after four groups withdrew their respective registrations toward the end of 2018. 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 stated that the registration process generally took four to six months to complete.

According to some nonevangelical Protestant groups, evangelicals received preferential access to the Morales government, which included meetings and phone calls with previous government leaders, because they were the main religious organization represented while drafting the new religion law.

According to media reports and religious leaders, then president Morales and other Movement for Socialism-affiliated government leaders continued to criticize Catholic leaders who publicly commented on political issues. Catholic representatives said the longstanding public tensions between the Catholic community and the Morales government continued through the end of the administration.

According to media, then president Morales also criticized the Catholic Church for its actions during the Inquisition and for what he said was its role in subjugating Bolivians during colonial times. Following the October 20 presidential elections,

then minister of the presidency Juan Ramon Quintana stated “outside actors,” including the Catholic Church, aligned with the opposition to sow fears of fraud. Quintana said in an interview with media, “fraud is an alibi that was installed a long time ago in the media networks, through contracted opinion makers, nongovernmental organizations with foreign funding, and the Catholic Church aligned with the right.”

According to media, Luis Fernando Camacho, then chair of the Civic Committee of Santa Cruz and a major critic of then president Morales, launched a campaign calling for Morales’ resignation and to “bring the Bible back to the palace of government.” On November 10, Camacho entered the old Government Palace with a Bible and a resignation letter for Morales to sign; Morales was not in the palace at the time, but he resigned later that day.

On May 24, then president Morales signed an agreement with the Methodist Church to establish better communication with the government and increased cooperation for social justice programming.

On November 28, Foreign Minister Karen Longaric announced at a press roundtable that the government would re-establish diplomatic relations with Israel. Then president Morales broke ties with Israel in 2009 over the conflict in Gaza.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of significant societal actions affecting religious freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. government access to Morales government officials in the previous administration was limited despite embassy requests for meetings. The transitional government showed interest in engaging the U.S. government, although no discussions on religious freedom took place with embassy officials in the few weeks the transition government was in office through year’s end.

Embassy representatives routinely engaged religious leaders to underscore the importance of tolerance and religious freedom. In October the Charge d’Affaires hosted interfaith meetings for religious leaders from the evangelical Protestant, Church of Jesus Christ, and Jewish communities to discuss religious freedom issues, such as the new religious freedom law, and to encourage religious leaders to

engage in interfaith dialogue. On other occasions, embassy officials engaged leaders of evangelical Protestant, Catholic, and Muslim groups.