

# PARAGUAY 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## 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) extended until the end of the year a grace period for all religious and philosophical groups to complete the mandatory registration process and did not impose penalties or monetary sanctions on groups that had not registered. In August authorities granted final approval of the application of the Catholic Christian Apostolic National Church of Paraguay (ICCAN) as a legal entity. According to ICCAN representatives, ICCAN applied for nonprofit organization (NPO) status in September. Following government approval of its NPO status, ICAAN resubmitted its registration request to the VMW, as required after the government approved its legal status. During the year, the Jehovah's Witnesses Association reported two cases of individual Jehovah's Witnesses receiving a hospital blood transfusion against their will; in one of the cases, the Supreme Court ruled the right to life prevailed over the patient's right to autonomy.

In May the VMW hosted the first Paraguayan-Argentine Interreligious Regional Symposium in the city of Encarnacion, in which Roman Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and Muslims participated. According to the VMW, the symposium aimed to communicate each country's commitment to religious diversity and foster respect for multiculturalism through interreligious dialogue. Roman Catholic, Protestant, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and Jewish representatives stated they regularly participated in various interreligious dialogues. In July, under the auspices of the Permanent Forum of Interreligious Dialogue, Baha'i, Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Jewish, Church of Jesus Christ, and Muslim communities signed a statement declaring the country an interreligious coexistence zone. The signatories said the statement would serve as an instrument to create and strengthen projects that promote interreligious coexistence based on the respect and acceptance of multiculturalism and diversity of ideas and beliefs.

U.S. embassy officials met with Director General Marco Mendez of the VMW and discussed ICCAN's registration status, government actions to facilitate the

registration process, the promotion of religious freedom, interreligious dialogue, whether any religious discrimination claims had been filed during the year, and the provision of state funding for schools run by religious groups. Embassy officials met with representatives of the Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Mennonite, Church of Jesus Christ, Muslim, ICCAN, and Jewish communities to discuss interfaith respect for religious diversity and hear their views on the status of religious freedom in the country.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 7.1 million (midyear 2019 estimate). A 2014 *Latinobarometro* report estimated 88 percent is Roman Catholic; a 2018 Vatican report estimated 89 percent is Roman Catholic and 6 percent evangelical Protestant. The Association of Evangelical Ministers of Paraguay estimates that 9.6 percent of the population is evangelical Protestant. Groups that together constitute between 1 and 4 percent of the population include Jehovah’s Witnesses, Jews, Church of Jesus Christ, Muslims, Buddhists, Mennonites, Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), and adherents of indigenous tribal beliefs.

Members of the Mennonite Church, who Church leaders estimate to number 46,000, are prominent in the remote areas of the central Chaco and some eastern regions of the country. ICCAN estimates its membership at more than 100,000. The Church of Jesus Christ estimates 70,000 members. According to Muslim leaders, there are approximately 10,000 Muslims, with the majority in Ciudad del Este. Jehovah’s Witnesses estimate the group’s membership at 10,950. According to representatives of the Jewish community, 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

Roman Catholic Church, however, must comply with all regulations the state imposes on other churches and non-Christian 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 and provide supporting documents to the VMW to register. The form requests basic information, including entity name, mission or vision, history in the country, church or temple addresses, 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. Once registered, religious and philosophical groups must update their registration on an annual basis and pay an annual fee of 62,000 guaranies (Gs) (\$10).

The VMW may apply nonmonetary administrative sanctions against organizations that fail to register, including ordering the suspension of religious services. 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 resubmit the registration form with updated information. 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 be of merit and possess ethical integrity. Registration for private religious schools is not mandatory, but the Ministry of Education and Culture recognizes only diplomas and degrees granted by registered institutions. Additionally, only registered schools with nonprofit status may receive subsidies for teachers' salaries. Students of religious groups other than the one associated with a private religious school may enroll; however, all students are expected to participate in the religious activities that are a mandatory part of the schedule.

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. They must also

register annually with the VMW to receive official documentation identifying their status as missionaries. Missionaries choosing not to register may enter the country on tourist visas. A law provides for Mennonites to implement their own education programs and exempts them from military service.

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

## Government Practices

The Jehovah’s Witnesses Association reported four pending cases of individual Jehovah’s Witnesses receiving a hospital blood transfusion against their will, two filed during the year and one each filed in 2018 and 2017. The Jehovah’s Witnesses Association opposed the measures and filed suits against the hospitals. During the year, the Jehovah’s Witnesses Association won one case against the Social Security Institute Hospital in the Court of Second Instance; however, the hospital appealed the decision to the Supreme Court. In August the court ruled that the right to life prevailed over the patient’s right to autonomy. An individual Jehovah’s Witness sued the Police Hospital in August. In August the Court of the Second Instance ruled in favor of the Police Hospital. The third case was filed in 2018 and was awaiting a first ruling at year’s end. In the fourth case, filed in 2017, the court of first instance ruled in favor of the Clinic Hospital, and in March the Jehovah’s Witnesses Association appealed to the Court of Second Instance.

The VMW extended until the end of the year a grace period for all religious and philosophical groups to complete the mandatory registration process and did not impose penalties or monetary sanctions on groups that had not registered. The ministry stated, however, that although the law required full compliance by the end of the year, it was focusing on raising public awareness of the registration law and had not set a date for enforcing compliance. The VMW stated it was implementing the registration law consistently across religious groups; once it received all required information and documents from a religious group, it would complete the process in 15 days.

According to the VMW, 530 religious groups had active registrations with the government, compared with 536 in 2018. Thirty-five new groups registered during the year, while 41 groups did not renew their registration.

According to the VMW, approximately 15 percent of religious groups were registered. VMW officials said the high cost associated with obtaining a legal representative, which requires hiring a lawyer costing between Gs 3,000,000 and

Gs 15,000,000 (\$470 to \$2,300), likely was a major barrier to registration. Another barrier was the requirement that entities travel to Asuncion to submit their documentation. The VMW said it was working with the Ministry of Interior to regulate lawyers' fees and planned on implementing an online registration process by mid-2020.

A Church of Jesus Christ representative expressed concern that the VMW's new requirements implemented during the year included personal information such as names, phone numbers, personal addresses of leaders, and email addresses of all their missionaries that they were not comfortable sharing. New requirements also included information on affiliated churches in the country, such as physical address as well as email, name of leader, and phone number. The representative said the Church of Jesus Christ would provide the required information but also convey their concerns to the VMW. The new information requests comprised part of the original 2017 decree establishing the registration process but were added to the form during the year.

In August authorities granted final approval of ICCAN's application as a legal entity, a pre-requirement for a religious group to apply for NPO status and ultimately, formal registration. According to ICCAN representatives, ICCAN applied for NPO status in September. Following government approval of its NPO status, ICCAN representatives resubmitted its registration request to the VMW as required when the government approved its legal status. ICCAN representatives said they were concerned the Roman Catholic Church in the country would obstruct its registration with the VMW because the Roman Catholic Church leadership stated it had exclusive use of the word "Catholic" in a church title. ICCAN representatives said the Roman Catholic Church's influence also helped it secure more subsidies for Catholic schools than other religious schools received. The VMW, however, provided information stating the Ministry of Education provided subsidies to 494 schools during the year, of which 252 were Roman Catholic and 242 were of various religious beliefs; the ministry also provided subsidies to nonreligious schools. Roman Catholic Church representatives expressed concerns that ICCAN's use of the word "Catholic" in its title would lead the public to believe the ICCAN was affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, even though the Roman Catholic Church did not recognize ICCAN as a valid Catholic church. The VMW stated ICCAN's title could still be an issue for completing its registration process. ICCAN representatives said the government continued not to recognize their claim to land and property they said the Catholic Church had taken from them in 1840. According to religious group representatives, the Roman Catholic Church's reservations about ICCAN's validity

was not representative of the views of the VMW or other religious communities, which said they respected ICCAN’s right to exist.

The VMW stated it did not receive cases of religious discrimination during the year.

The Ministry of Education and Culture continued to subsidize the salaries of hundreds of teachers in registered, nonprofit schools operated by predominantly Roman Catholic religious groups. According to representatives of the Mennonite community, the government had started to provide subsidies to their schools during the year; Jewish community members said they did not request government subsidies. According to a ministry representative, the ministry maintained an agreement with the Roman Catholic Church governing the allocation of subsidies to schools in areas not served by public schools. The representative also stated that a separate agreement set very similar regulations for subsidy allocation to other religious schools located in underserved areas serving vulnerable student populations and providing educational or scholarship services to vulnerable students. Mennonite schools in Boqueron Department continued an ad hoc consultation process with departmental authorities.

The VMW reported that 353 foreign missionaries registered or reregistered by year’s end, compared with 309 in 2018 – most of them members of the Church of Jesus Christ.

The government continued to support chaplaincy programs open to all religious groups in the armed forces. 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 religious groups to operate in and provide the services of different religions within prisons for adults and youth; however, during the year only Christian groups made use of this option.

In May the VMW hosted the first Paraguayan-Argentine Interreligious Regional Symposium in which representatives from the Roman Catholic Church, Muslim, and evangelical Protestant communities participated. The symposium, held in the city of Encarnacion in the southern part of the country, highlighted each country’s commitment to peaceful religious coexistence and the importance of interreligious dialogue to encourage respect for religious and multicultural diversity. Through the symposium, communities committed to promote interreligious dialogue, schedule meetings, and collaborate with the government and international

organizations to develop respect for diversity. The symposium also helped identify areas for collaboration as well as share statistical information on members of each faith.

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

Observers, including from nongovernmental organizations, political pundits, and the press, stated the Roman Catholic Church continued to maintain an influential role within society and government that gave it an advantage over other religious groups in the country. According to media reports, because Roman Catholicism is the dominant religion, both citizens and the government valued the opinion of the Roman Catholic Church on political matters. On May 15, the Roman Catholic Church hosted a Te Deum to honor the country’s independence in which President Mario Abdo Benitez, other members of the government, and individuals from other religious groups, including the Church of Jesus Christ, Jews, and evangelical Protestants, participated. On December 8, President Benitez participated in the ceremony of a local Christian holiday, “Virgen de Caacupe,” in which a priest’s homily asked the president to defend the country’s national interests in upcoming negotiations with Brazil on the Itaipu Treaty.

The Public Prosecutor’s Office continued to investigate a formal complaint filed by the Public Ministry’s Ethnic Rights Office in 2018 concerning a video posted online showing an evangelical Protestant pastor exorcising an elderly indigenous religious leader in the Mbya indigenous community of Caaguazu Department. The Public Prosecutor’s Office, rather than the VMW, investigated the case because the indigenous religious leader said the pastor had also stolen items from him. According to media reports, the pastor belonged to the Pentecostal Church Prince of Peace, an unregistered church.

Representatives of the local Jewish community said they continued to monitor a group, formerly called Paraguay Nacional Socialista (PNS), that actively espoused Nazi and xenophobic ideology in 2016-2017 but had since either disappeared or gone underground. According to Facebook, the PNS changed its name to Identidad Nacional (IN) in 2018 and shifted to nationalist rhetoric. According to members of the Jewish community, IN did not attack any individuals or publish anti-Semitic statements during the year. Its rhetoric targeted Brazilian landowners in rural areas of the country rather than Jews, and the IN organized small rallies in the countryside. The head of the Jewish community said he believed the PNS continued to operate underground, and that therefore the Jewish community continued to monitor the group closely. Jewish community members said they had

confidence in the security forces and the private security companies the community hired to protect places of worship, schools, and community centers.

In October the Church of Jesus Christ completed renovation of its main temple in Asuncion and opened it for public visits. A Church representative said Roman Catholic, Muslim, Jewish, and Baha'i community representatives coordinated a joint visit to the temple.

A Permanent Forum of Interreligious Dialogue organized by the Baha'i community worked to promote shared common values, including religious tolerance, to benefit society. In July the forum brought together Baha'i, Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Jewish, Church of Jesus Christ, and Muslim communities in Asuncion where they signed an agreement declaring the country an interreligious coexistence zone. The statement also served as an instrument to create and strengthen projects promoting interreligious coexistence based on the respect and acceptance of multiculturalism and diversity of ideas and beliefs.

Christian and Jewish groups continued holding interreligious dialogues among religious group representatives. The Roman Catholic Church hosted a dialogue in May that included Jewish, Church of Jesus Christ, and evangelical Protestant participants.

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

Embassy officials met with Director General Mendez of the VMW to discuss issues related to ICCAN's registration process, government actions to facilitate the registration of other religious groups, the promotion of religious freedom, interreligious dialogue, whether any religious discrimination claims were filed during the year, and the provision of state funding for salaries at schools run by religious groups.

Embassy officials met with Roman Catholic, Mennonite, Catholic Christian Apostolic, Muslim, evangelical Protestant, Church of Jesus Christ, and Jewish leaders to discuss religious freedom and the government's attitude towards their communities.