

# COSTA RICA

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. government supported dialogue among religious communities through invitations to religious leaders to participate in U.S. embassy events and attendance by embassy officers at events held by religious groups.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to a survey provided during the year by the University of Costa Rica, approximately 47 percent of the population identified itself as practicing Roman Catholic, 23 percent as non-practicing Catholic, 16 percent as evangelical Protestant, 6 percent as belonging to other religions, and 8 percent as having no religious affiliation.

Among Protestants approximately 92 percent of the population is Pentecostal and 8 percent is Baptist. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints estimates membership at 35,000 and the Lutheran Church estimates 5,500 members. The Jewish Zionist Center estimates that there are 2,800 Jews in the country. An estimated 1,000 Quakers live in the cloud forest reserve of Monteverde, Puntarenas, and an additional 1,000 persons attend Quaker meetings as nonmembers throughout the country. Although they represent less than 1 percent of the population, Jehovah's Witnesses have a strong presence on the Caribbean coast. Seventh-day Adventists operate a university that attracts students from throughout the Caribbean Basin. The Unification Church has its headquarters for Latin America in San Jose. Other religious groups include followers of Islam, Taoism, Krishna Consciousness, Scientology, Tenrikyo, and the Baha'i Faith. Indigenous peoples are more likely than nonindigenous peoples to practice animism.

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

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution provides the right to practice the religion of one's choice. In the event of a violation of religious freedom, a victim may file a lawsuit with the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court. A person claiming violation of religious freedom also may file a motion before the Constitutional Chamber to have a statute or regulation declared unconstitutional. Additionally, a person claiming violation of religious freedom may appeal to the administrative court for permission to sue the government for alleged discriminatory acts. Laws generally are applied and enforced in a rigorous and nondiscriminatory fashion. Legal protections cover discrimination by private actors.

The constitution establishes Catholicism as the state religion and requires that the state contribute to its maintenance. The constitution also prohibits the state from impeding the free exercise of other religions that do not impugn universal morality or proper behavior.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religion is responsible for managing the government's relationship with the Catholic Church and other religious groups. The ministry included funding in its annual budget for maintenance and repairs of some Catholic churches during the year. The Catholic Church receives exemptions from income and real estate taxes.

The law allows the government to provide land to the Catholic Church. This practice was established in part to restore land the government seized from the church during the 19th century. Government-to-church land transfers typically are effected through periodic legislation. During the year four bills were approved that required land to be donated by a local municipality to the Catholic Church for new church construction. Additionally, the government earmarked funding for construction of Catholic churches in the municipality of Buenos Aires. Some evangelical leaders stated that it was unfair for the government to provide land and tax exemptions only to the Catholic Church.

Only officials of the Catholic Church and public notaries can perform marriages that are recognized by the state. Wedding ceremonies performed by other religious

groups must be legalized through a civil union. Couples also may choose to have a civil ceremony only.

The constitution establishes that the president, vice president, cabinet members, and supreme court justices may not be Catholic clergy. The Supreme Elections Tribunal has ruled that the prohibition against serving in high-level public offices does not apply to non-Catholic clergy.

The government does not require religious groups to register, nor does it inhibit the establishment of religious groups through taxation or special licensing requirements. According to the Law of Associations, a group with a minimum of 10 persons may incorporate as an association with juridical status by registering with the public registry of the Ministry of Justice. Religious groups, similar to other associations, must register to engage in any type of fundraising activity.

A 2007 executive order provides a legal framework for religious organizations to establish places of worship. Religious organizations must submit applications to the local municipality to establish a place of worship and comply with safety and noise regulations as established by the General Health Law.

Under regulations implementing the 2006 immigration law, religious workers must apply for temporary residency before arrival. The law requires foreign religious workers to belong to a religious organization accredited by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Religion and stipulates that religious workers may be granted permission to stay at least 90 days but not more than two years.

The Ministry of Public Education provides subsidies to private schools, both Catholic and non-Catholic, including direct placement of a teacher, provision of a teacher's salary, and other monetary support.

Public schools provide Catholic religious instruction. Students may obtain exemptions with the permission of their parents. The school director, the student's parents, and the student's teacher must agree on an alternative course of instruction. In February the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court annulled the section of the educational code that gave sole authority to the Catholic Church to select and dismiss teachers of religion for the public school system.

Private schools were not required to offer religious instruction. Parents did not have the option of homeschooling their children.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Our Lady of the Angels Day (August 2), and Christmas. The labor code allows for the observance of other religious holy days upon the employer's approval.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Some non-Catholic leaders believed that the Law of Associations does not sufficiently address the specific concerns of religious groups. They would prefer a separate registration for religious groups that would specifically facilitate church construction and operation, permits to organize events, and pastoral access to hospitals and jails. Representatives of various religious groups reported that hospital and prison security personnel occasionally denied them access for pastoral care to their members in public hospitals and prisons.

The Evangelical Alliance Federation asserted that the Ministry of Health continued to close churches that were not in compliance with the executive order providing a legal framework to establish places of worship. According to the federation, noise pollution and a lack of municipal permits related to land-use law were the main reasons cited for church closures. The government opened a discussion of the issue, with the aim of negotiating an executive order accepted by all groups.

Some non-Catholic leaders complained that exemptions to religious instruction in schools also sometimes required a letter from the child's pastor. Students occasionally were required to remain in the classroom while Catholic doctrine was taught.

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

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The Catholic Church met periodically with other religious groups through the Ecumenical Affairs Committee of the Catholic Conference of Bishops. Other organizations promoting religious understanding included the Jewish-Christian Fraternity and the Costa Rican-Jewish Cultural Institute.

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

U.S. embassy representatives met with religious communities through attendance at religious events, such as a mass in honor of John Paul II's beatification on May 1. The embassy invited representatives of various religious communities to its Independence Day celebration. The U.S. ambassador used social media to send congratulatory messages to religious groups on special religious occasions.