

CHILE 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and worship. Religion and state are separate. The law prohibits religious discrimination and provides civil remedies to victims of discrimination. The National Office of Religious Affairs (ONAR) is charged with facilitating communication between faith communities and the government and ensuring the protection of the rights of members of minority religious groups.

In September, voters rejected in a plebiscite a draft constitution that included four articles providing protections for religious freedom. In July, Roman Catholic bishops released a communique that included criticisms of the draft's potential limitations, in their view, of the right to religious freedom. During remarks in August at a Communal Evangelical Thanksgiving service (*Te Deum*), Ministry Secretary General of the Presidency Giorgio Jackson emphasized the government's commitment to strengthen the recognition of and respect for religious and spiritual diversity, without exclusions or privileges. On September 15, President Gabriel Boric refused to accept the diplomatic credentials of the Israeli Ambassador following the death of a 17-year-old Palestinian in Israel on the same day. Jewish Community of Chile President Gerardo Gorodischer stated that President Boric's action had led to an increase in antisemitic comments on social media. On September 30, President Boric accepted the Ambassador's credentials. In November, Boric condemned the burnings of churches in the Araucanía Region, likening it to the burnings of synagogues in Nazi-era Germany. ONAR continued to engage with local authorities in the communities affected by the arson attacks, including helping to rebuild the damaged churches. In August, ONAR director Omar Cortes participated in a special session of the Committee on Juridical and Political Affairs at the Organization of American States (OAS), where he underscored how engaging religious actors helped improve religious freedom.

According to ONAR, arson attacks on churches by unidentified individuals reportedly associated with some Mapuche Indigenous groups in Araucanía continued for the seventh year in a row. Fire damaged a Catholic church in San Sebastian de Curarrehue, another Catholic church near the town of Radal, and a school and church in the commune of Los Sauces. Jewish community leaders reported an increase in antisemitic social media posts and media publications, including the publication on July 11 of a “Happy Merchant” Nazi-era meme.

On July 19-21, the U.S. Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism visited the country and held meetings with government officials and leaders of the Jewish community. The U.S. Ambassador, Chargé d’Affaires, and other U.S. embassy representatives met with government officials to discuss reports of antisemitism, security concerns of members of religious minority groups, and institutional cooperation between religious organizations and the government. Embassy officials also met with civil society and religious leaders to discuss religious diversity and tolerance and to raise incidents of concern, including perceived threats to members of the Jewish community.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 18.4 million (midyear 2022). According to ONAR’s 2021 estimates, 70 percent of the population identifies as Catholic and an estimated 18 percent identifies as “evangelical,” a term used in the country to refer to non-Catholic Christian groups, including Episcopalians, but not The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Orthodox Churches (including Armenian, Greek, Persian, Serbian, and Ukrainian communities), and Seventh-day Adventists. In the 2002 census, the most recent that includes religious affiliation, Baha’is, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims (Sunni and Shia, including those who identify with Sufism, among others), members of Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), the Church of Jesus Christ, the Orthodox Churches, and other unspecified religious groups together constitute less than 5 percent of the

population. An estimated 4 percent of the population identifies as atheist or agnostic, while 17 percent of the population identifies as nonreligious.

According to ONAR's 2021 estimates, 9 percent of the population self-identifies as Indigenous, of which approximately 38 percent identifies as evangelical, 30 percent as Catholic, and 6 percent as other; the remaining 26 percent lists no religious affiliation. ONAR states that many of those individuals also incorporate traditional Indigenous faith practices into their worship.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the free exercise of worship. It states these practices must not be "opposed to morals, to good customs, or to the public order." Religious groups may establish and maintain places of worship if the locations comply with public hygiene and security regulations established by laws and municipal orders. According to the constitution, religion and the state are officially separate.

The law prohibits discrimination based on religion, provides civil remedies to victims of discrimination based on their religion or belief, and increases criminal penalties for acts of discriminatory violence. The law prohibits discrimination in the provision of social services, education, the ability to practice religious beliefs or gain employment, property rights, and the right to build places of worship.

By law, registration for possible conscription to the military is mandatory for all men between the ages of 17 and 45. Performing alternative service by working for the armed forces in a job related to the selectee's expertise is possible only for those studying in certain fields. The law makes no provision for conscientious objection. Only ministers or priests from registered religious organizations are exempted on religious grounds.

The law does not require religious groups to register with the government, although there are tax benefits for those that do. Once registered, a religious group is recognized as a religious nonprofit organization. Religious organizations have the option of adopting a charter and bylaws suited to a religious entity rather than to a private corporation or a secular nonprofit. Under the law, religious nonprofit organizations may create affiliates, such as charitable foundations, schools, or additional houses of worship, that retain the tax benefits of the parent religious organization. According to ONAR, public law recognizes more than 5,957 religious organizations as legal entities. By law, the Ministry of Justice must accept the registration petition of a religious entity, although it may object to petitions within 90 days if legal prerequisites for registration are not satisfied.

Applicants for religious nonprofit status must provide the Ministry of Justice with an authorized copy of their charter and corresponding bylaws with charter members' signatures and their national identification numbers. The bylaws must include the organization's mission, creed, and structure. The charter must specify the signatories, the name of the organization, and its physical address, and it must include confirmation that the religious institution's charter signatories approved the bylaws. In the event the Ministry of Justice raises objections to the group, the group has 60 days to address the ministry's objections or challenge them in court. Once a religious entity is registered, the state may not dissolve it by decree. If concerns are raised regarding a religious group's activities after registration, the semiautonomous Council for the Defense of the State may initiate a judicial review of the matter. The government has never deregistered a legally registered group. One registration per religious group is sufficient to extend nonprofit status to affiliates, such as additional places of worship or schools, clubs, or sports organizations, without registering them as separate entities.

ONAR is charged with facilitating communication between faith communities and the government and ensuring the protection of the rights of members of minority religious groups.

By law, all public schools must offer religious education as an elective class for two teaching hours per week through pre-elementary, elementary, middle, and high school. Local school administrators decide how religious education classes are structured. Most religious instruction in public schools is Catholic. The Ministry of Education also has approved instruction curricula designed by 14 other religious groups, including Orthodox and Reform Jews, evangelical Christians, and Seventh-day Adventists. Schools must provide religious instruction for students according to students' religious affiliations. Parents may have their children excused from religious education. Parents also have the right to homeschool their children for religious reasons or enroll them in private, religiously oriented schools.

The law grants all religious groups the right to appoint chaplains to offer religious services in public hospitals and prisons and does not make a distinction between registered and unregistered groups. Prisoners may request religious accommodations. Regulations for armed forces and law enforcement agencies allow officially registered religious groups to appoint chaplains to serve in each branch of the armed forces, the national uniformed police, and the national investigative police.

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

Government Practices

On June 28, the Constitutional Convention approved a draft constitution that included four paragraphs that would establish freedom of religion as a fundamental right and expand on rights pertaining to religious freedom in the current constitution. One article established that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and worldview; this right includes the freedom to profess and change religion or beliefs." The convention presented the draft constitution to President Boric on July 4. On September 4, voters rejected the proposed constitution in a national plebiscite. Prior to the plebiscite, a group of Catholic bishops released a communique on July 22, calling for each citizen to

have an “informed and conscientious vote” in the plebiscite. The bishops supported the text’s inclusion of social rights, environmental protection, and recognition of Indigenous peoples but opposed the proposed constitution’s guarantee of access to abortion, the proposed legalization of euthanasia, and the proposed limitations on “the right to education and religious freedom.” Separately, the Chilean Episcopal Conference questioned whether the text provided “an adequate social and legal framework to build peace, solidarity, and justice” in the country.

On September 2, then Ministry Secretary General of the Presidency Jackson and representatives of ONAR, the Chilean Association of Interreligious Dialogue for Human Development (ADIR), and the Freemasons participated in a “Call to Concord” event with representatives of several faith traditions to promote peaceful dialogue prior to the plebiscite. During the meeting, Jackson expressed the importance of “putting love above the differences that may exist.”

On September 15, President Boric refused to accept the diplomatic credentials of the Israeli Ambassador following the death of a 17-year-old Palestinian reportedly shot by Israeli forces near the occupied West Bank town of Jenin. Jewish Community of Chile President Gorodischer stated that Boric’s refusal to accept the credentials led to an increase in antisemitic comments on social media. President Boric subsequently accepted the Israeli Ambassador’s credentials on September 30.

On March 5, then President-elect Boric met with 12 Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders a week before his March 11 inauguration. In the meeting, Boric highlighted the role and importance of collaboration with the country’s diverse religious communities.

On August 29, government officials participated in a Communal Evangelical Te Deum organized by the Methodist Pentecostal Church of Chile. Then Ministry Secretary General Jackson discussed the government’s commitment to

strengthen recognition and respect for religious and spiritual diversity, without exclusions or privileges.

On June 13, during the IX Summit of the Americas in Los Angeles, ONAR director Cortes participated in the Second Interfaith Forum of the Americas (FIDELA). Over 100 religious actors and representatives of faith-based organizations and policy experts from across North, Central, and South America and the Caribbean participated in the event, which included discussion on vigilance in protecting freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression, including in Chile. On August 5, Cortes participated in a special session of the OAS Committee on Juridical and Political Affairs that focused on the strategic role of religious actors in the response to health crises, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. Cortes underscored how engaging religious actors helped to improve religious freedom and counter false narratives surrounding COVID-19 vaccination.

In November, President Boric condemned the burnings of churches in the Araucanía Region, likening it to the burnings of synagogues in Nazi-era Germany. ONAR continued to engage with local authorities in the communities affected by attacks on churches in several regions of the country, including the Araucanía and Santiago Regions, to rebuild the damaged churches. ONAR helped the affected churches report threats to police and pressed for increased police monitoring and patrols of religious buildings in the region.

According to government officials, the country respected religious diversity and recognized that Jews play a leading role in preventing intolerance. Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Ximena Fuentes said that Palestinians and Jews enjoyed close relations, including through their joint attendance in integrated public schools.

In December, the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB), an international network of lawmakers dedicated to the fight against religious persecution and defense of Article 18 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights, convened at the National Congress in Santiago for the first time. Current and former legislators discussed the development of a roadmap to better

address and guarantee all Chileans' right to freedom of religion or belief. Deputy Mercedes Bulnes affirmed that the country would continue to collaborate with IPPFoRB in 2023 to promote religious freedom in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to ONAR, arson attacks on Catholic and evangelical Christian churches in Araucanía Region by unidentified individuals reportedly associated with Mapuche Indigenous groups continued to occur for the seventh year in a row. According to media reports, several priests and churches in Araucanía reportedly received arson threats during the year. ONAR reported that its regional directors had maintained contact with the churches and communities affected by the arson attacks and that ONAR held discussions with governors regarding possible assistance. According to academic and nongovernmental sources, the Mapuche, the country's largest Indigenous group, considered most of Araucanía as ancestral, sacred territory and continued to call for the government to return lands confiscated prior to the return to democracy in the late 1980s. Some factions of the Mapuche reportedly continued to use violence, including attacks on churches and private residences, to demand the return of land.

On January 10, media outlets reported that a fire destroyed the Church of San Sebastian de Curarrehue in Araucanía, built in 1953 and run by the Piarist Fathers. The fire also destroyed the offices of the parish in the Diocese of Villarica. On May 18, news media reported that unknown assailants burned a Catholic church near the commune of Freire and the town of Radal in Araucanía hours after the government declared a state of emergency in the region. On June 22, uniformed police arrested three individuals suspected of starting a fire in the middle of the former Carabineros Francisco de Borja Church, a church associated with the country's uniformed national police, called *carabineros*, in the commune of Santiago. The church had been previously burned during riots in 2020 and subsequently abandoned. On July 29, media outlets reported that at least 15 armed hooded men, reportedly associated with Weichán Auka Mapu, a militant organization formed in 2010 inside the predominantly Mapuche-affiliated

Coordinadora Arauco Malleco (CAM) operating primarily in Arauco and Malleco Provinces, intimidated residents of a church property in the Trafún sector of Panguipulli in the town of Liquiñea and set fire to structures on the site, including a chapel, destroying it completely. On August 6, a school and a church were burned in the commune of Los Sauces in the province of Malleco, in the Araucanía Region. On November 10, unidentified arsonists burned a church in Selva Oscura and a rural school in Curacautin, both located in Araucanía, on the same day that President Boric visited the region. As of year's end, authorities had not detained any suspects in the arson attacks.

Jewish community leaders again expressed concern regarding what they stated was a continuing rise in antisemitism in the country. The Jewish community reported an increase in antisemitic social media posts and media publications, including the publication on July 11 of a "Happy Merchant" Nazi-era meme. The meme, which depicted a Jewish man with a hooked nose and a sly smile rubbing his hands with glee alongside discounted bottles of bourbon and rum with dollar bills scattered around, was embedded in a newspaper advertisement published in the daily tabloid *Las Ultimas Noticias*. In a statement on its Twitter account, the Jewish community denounced the ad for reviving a "classic stereotype of Nazi propaganda" that led to the "genocide of six million Jews" during the Holocaust.

On October 25-26, representatives from the Episcopal Conference of Chile, the Church of Jesus Christ, publishing company Santillana, and the Episcopate's National Commission of Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue participated in the 10th National Congress of Catholic Education. Participants focused on addressing the challenges of interreligious education and sharing information on interreligious projects at all levels of education. On October 3, Pontifical Catholic University Rector Ignacio Sanchez and university officials held a meeting with the Jewish-Muslim Fellowship of Argentina, led by Imam Marwan Gill of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community of Argentina and Rabbi Miguel Steuermann, director of Radio Jai. In a letter published in the national daily newspaper *La Tercera*, Sanchez advocated interreligious dialogue to "respect and value the faith and beliefs of all the members of our country."

At an interfaith Te Deum on September 18, Cardinal Celestino Aós, Archbishop of Santiago, said that “religious freedom is a right of every human being.” The Cardinal also emphasized that “[w]e cannot turn the other who does not think like us into an enemy,” referring to the September 4 plebiscite in which 62 percent of eligible voters rejected a draft constitution.

During the year, religious groups and umbrella organizations, such as ADIR, which includes Catholics, Orthodox Church representatives, Adventists, Anglicans, Baptists, Evangelicals, Lutherans, members of the Church of Jesus Christ, Jews, Muslims, Baha’is, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Brahma Kumaris, and individuals who follow Indigenous spiritual traditions, held several events, including an interfaith “Call to Concord” event with ONAR on September 2.

On May 27, a newly established Interreligious and Intercultural Advisory Council for the North Metropolitan Health Service met at the Catholic Church’s archdiocese of Santiago to plan future activities, including a discussion on managing grief resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, an intercultural discussion with representatives from Indigenous and migrant communities, and a training course on bereavement. A virtual meeting included representatives from the Jewish and Muslim communities, Catholic and Protestant Churches, Indigenous groups, and migrant communities.

On March 30, the Catholic University’s Center for Religious Studies, Constitutional Forum, and Law and Religion Center hosted a webinar titled “Democracy, Religious Freedom, and Society in the Chile of the Future: International Reflections.” The webinar reflected on the relevance and applicability of religious freedom in democratic societies, particularly in relation to the country’s debate over a new constitution. The discussion panel included academics from the University of Manchester, Nottingham Trent University, Complutense University of Madrid, and a senator from Uruguay.

Religions for Peace, a multireligious, leadership-based organization with international women and youth networks as well as more than 90 interreligious

councils around the world, continued its interfaith work in the country. On June 6, Elias Szczytnicki, Secretary General of Religions for Peace, joined ONAR Director Cortes, along with religious leaders, representatives of faith-based organizations, and academic experts, for the FIDELA Conference, held within the framework of the Summit of the Americas.

On March 12, Jewish and Muslim leaders and representatives from Christian denominations, including Evangelicals, Lutherans, Adventists, and Catholics, participated in a “prayer for Chile” at the Metropolitan Cathedral presided over by Cardinal Aós.

On February 9, the Baha’i community hosted a panel discussion entitled, “From Social Injustice and Segregation to a New Model of Human-centered Cities,” at the Baha’i House of Worship in Santiago. According to Luis Sandoval of the Baha’i Office of External Affairs, the Baha’i House of Worship has played a role in creating inclusive discussion spaces and bringing together government officials with leaders of faith communities and thousands of the country’s citizens to discuss the topic of social cohesion.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

On July 19-21, the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism visited the country, where she met with officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ONAR, leaders from the Jewish Community of Chile, and academic experts. The Special Envoy likened antisemitism to a “canary in the coal mine,” a flashing yellow light of hazards ahead. The Special Envoy discussed with representatives of the Jewish community concerns regarding antisemitism in the country and their plans to strengthen ties with human rights organizations. She underscored how antisemitism erodes democratic institutions and values.

The Ambassador, Chargé, and other embassy representatives met with government officials, including from ONAR, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Interior Ministry, and members of congress, to discuss the status of religious

minorities in the country, interfaith dialogue efforts, reports of antisemitism, and institutional cooperation between government and religious organizations.

The Ambassador, Chargé, and other embassy representatives met with civil society and religious leaders to discuss religious diversity and tolerance and incidents of concern, including perceived threats to the Jewish community.

On September 18, the Ambassador attended an interfaith Te Deum event, during which she discussed the U.S. government's prioritization of religious freedom and respect for religious diversity.

The embassy continued to use social media to underscore the importance of interfaith understanding and tolerance, including posting articles on religious freedom, interfaith celebrations in the United States, and the International Religious Freedom Day commemoration. During the year, the embassy hosted two speaker events on religious freedom, including presentations by the founder of the U.S.-based Terezín Music Foundation and the Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Antisemitism.