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# 2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Costa Rica

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution recognizes Roman Catholicism as the state religion; the law requires the state to contribute to the Catholic Church's maintenance. The constitution prohibits the state from impeding the free exercise of religions that does not impugn "universal morality or proper behavior," and it provides for redress in cases of alleged violations of religious freedom.

In September, a representative introduced a bill in the legislative assembly to allow sanctioning private enterprises that discriminate on the basis of religion or other protected categories. Also in September, a representative introduced a bill to obligate those in positions of authority, including religious authorities, to report instances of sexual crimes committed against minors or individuals with disabilities. Catholic Church officials criticized the bill as an affront to religious freedom. Members of Protestant groups registered as secular associations continued to state their preference for a separate registration process that would specifically cover church construction and operation, permits to organize events, and pastoral access to hospitals and prisons for members of non-Catholic religious groups. The Constitutional Chamber received four claims of religious discrimination. Indigenous leaders raised concerns about a lack of adequate demarcation of Indigenous lands and overlap between Indigenous lands and national parks limiting access to areas connected to spiritual practices.

In February, the Catholic Church reached a settlement in a civil case of four individuals who stated they were sexually abused by a former Catholic priest. A UN study released in June found of the 1.4 million posts analyzed, 53,000, or approximately 2.5 percent, referenced religion. The study noted this represented a decrease of 31 percent compared to the previous year. Jewish community leaders continued to report anti-Israel comments appearing on social media, some of which they said were antisemitic. The leaders reported some messages combined negative comments against Jews with criticism of Israel's actions in response to the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel. Muslim leaders continued to cite what they stated was a lack of societal awareness of Islamic religious practices and traditions, which contributed to harmful negative stereotypes. In response, Muslim community representatives hosted student groups to help promote greater understanding and increase awareness of their faith to decrease incidents of discrimination and bias against Muslims.

U.S. embassy representatives engaged with a representative from the Legislative Assembly to discuss legislative initiatives related to religious freedom. Embassy representatives met regularly to discuss perspectives on religious freedom and other issues with leaders of the Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, and evangelical Protestant communities. In September, embassy officials hosted an interfaith roundtable with leaders from the Interreligious Forum, faith-based organizations, and Muslim, Jewish, and evangelical Christian communities to discuss the perspective and role of religious communities in responding to record levels of migration to and through the country.

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## Section I.

### Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.2 million (midyear 2023). According to a University of Costa Rica (UCR) study released in 2021, Catholics represent approximately 47 percent of the population (compared with 49 percent in 2019); no religious affiliation, 27 percent (20 percent in 2019); evangelical Christians, 19 percent; other Protestants, 1 percent (the 2019 study estimated all Protestants combined at 36 percent); no response, 6 percent; and others, 2.7 percent.

Most Protestants are Pentecostal, with smaller numbers of Lutherans and Baptists. There are an estimated 32,000 Jehovah's Witnesses, predominantly on the Caribbean coast. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints estimates its membership at 50,000. The Muslim Cultural Center estimated there are approximately 7,500 Muslims. The Israelite Zionist Center

estimates there are between 3,000 and 3,500 Jews. Approximately 1,000 Quakers live near the cloud forest reserve of Monteverde, Puntarenas. Smaller groups include followers of Taoism, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Scientology, Tenrikyo, and the Baha'i Faith. Some members of Indigenous groups follow Indigenous spiritual practices.

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## Section II.

# Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

## **LEGAL FRAMEWORK**

The constitution establishes Catholicism as the state religion and requires the state to contribute to its maintenance. The constitution prohibits the state from impeding the free exercise of other religions that do not undermine "universal morality or proper behavior." Unlike other religious groups, the Catholic Church receives special legal recognition under a concordat, and it is not registered as an association. Its assets and holdings are governed consistent with Catholic canon law.

The constitution recognizes the right to practice the religion of one's choice. By law, a person claiming a violation of religious freedom may file suit with the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court and may also file a motion before the Constitutional Chamber to have a statute or regulation declared unconstitutional. Additionally, a person claiming a violation of religious freedom may appeal to the Administrative Court to sue the government for alleged discriminatory acts. Legal protections cover discrimination by private persons and entities as well as the government.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship is responsible for managing the government's relationship with the Catholic Church and other religious groups. According to the law, a group with a minimum of 10 persons may incorporate as an association with judicial status by registering with the public registry of the Ministry of Justice. The government does not require religious groups to register; however, religious groups must register if they engage in any type of fundraising. Authorities require registration to conduct financial transactions, obtain legal representation, and own property.

The constitution forbids Catholic clergy from serving in the capacity of president, vice president, cabinet member, or Supreme Court justice. This prohibition does not apply to non-Catholic clergy.

An executive order provides the legal framework for religious groups to establish places of worship. They must submit applications to the local municipality to establish a place of worship and comply with safety and noise regulations established by law.

According to the law, public schools must provide nonsectarian Christian religious instruction for all grades by a person who is able to promote moral values and tolerance and be respectful of human rights. If a parent on behalf of a child chooses to opt out of religious courses, the parent must make a written request. The Ministry of Public Education provides religious education assistance to private schools, both Catholic and non-Catholic, including directly hiring teachers and providing teacher salaries and other funds for all grades.

The law allows the government to provide land free of charge only to the Catholic Church.

Only Catholic priests and public notaries may perform state-recognized marriages. Wedding ceremonies performed by other religious groups must be legalized through a civil union.

Immigration law requires foreign religious workers to belong to a religious group accredited for migration control purposes by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship. It stipulates religious workers may receive permission, which is renewable, to stay at least 90 days, but not more than two years. To obtain accreditation, a religious group must present documentation about its organization, including its complete name, number of followers, bank information, number of houses of worship, and names of and information on the group's board of directors. Immigration regulations require religious workers to apply for temporary residence before arrival.

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

## **GOVERNMENT PRACTICES**

As of year's end, the Legislative Assembly was still working to resolve proposed amendments to a hate crime bill introduced in 2020 that would criminalize hate crimes, cases of discrimination, and other abuses of human rights. In September, a representative introduced a separate bill to allow sanctioning businesses or private enterprises that discriminate on the basis of religion or other protected categories. Also in September, a representative introduced a bill to obligate those in positions of authority, including religious authorities, to report instances of sexual crimes committed against minors or individuals with disabilities. Catholic representatives publicly criticized the proposed measure as an affront to religious freedom by potentially obligating priests to break the secrecy of confession.

During a meeting, the government outlined its priorities for advancing religious freedom, including codifying the registration process for religious groups and outreach to religious communities.

In September, the government announced it was partnering with the United Nations to create a National Strategy against Hate Speech and Discrimination. Authorities said a multidisciplinary team of professionals with extensive experience in government and the United Nations would lead the process with the goal of completing the strategy by the end of the year.

In May, two draft bills introduced in 2019 expired due to lack of legislative action. One sought to amend the constitution to make the country a secular state. The other aimed to clarify the legal responsibilities of religious groups in connection with misconduct and illegal acts committed by religious leaders who are affiliated with them and to amend the criminal code to place religious leaders or organizations that use their activities for illegal acts under a distinct criminal code.

Members of Protestant groups registered as secular associations continued to state their preference for a separate registration process that would specifically cover church construction and operation, permits to organize events, and pastoral access to hospitals and prisons for members of non-Catholic religious groups. The groups continued to seek the changes through the passage of a religious freedom bill under legislative review since 2018. If passed, the bill would address the concerns of non-Catholic groups regarding the registration of religious groups, including through language clarifying the definition of religious groups. According to authorities, when the government denied a religious group's registration, it was often because the group's purpose or main activity did not include worship. In the case of the Catholic Church, the government continued to address such concerns through the special legal recognition afforded the Church under canon law.

During the year, the Constitutional Chamber received four claims of religious discrimination. Two concerned failure by a school and a university to reschedule exams for claimants who celebrated a religious holiday on the day of the exam. The chamber agreed with the students and the institutions rescheduled their exams. A third claim involved a member of Jehovah's Witnesses who received an emergency blood transfusion in a surgical procedure due to the lack of an alternative solution. The chamber dismissed this claim on grounds that the hospital tried to use an alternative method. The final claim concerned minors who were forced to remain in a religion class despite their parents' written request that they be exempted. The

chamber ordered the school to let the students wait in another space during the religion class and ordered the state to pay any resultant costs, damages, and losses.

Indigenous leaders raised concerns about a lack of adequate demarcation of Indigenous lands and overlap between Indigenous lands and national parks that limited access to areas connected to spiritual practices. They stated there was a lack of clarity and inconsistency regarding whether laws regulating protected spaces or those guaranteeing access rights for Indigenous persons took precedence.

For the second consecutive year and in a departure from previous norms, the government did not include financial support for the Catholic Church and evangelical Christian groups in its annual budget, which was presented on September 1 and approved on November 30. The budget did not include funding for government to church land transfers, which were typically granted through periodic legislation. Previous funding to evangelical Christian groups was primarily to renovate places of worship. During the year, however, the legislature approved an extraordinary expenditure of 240,000 colones (\$462) to purchase audio equipment and musical instruments for the Tree of Life Christian Church, in the community of Llano Bonito, Brunka District. According to the director of the FAEC, the lack of government funding did not represent a major concern for its member churches because government funding had always been a small part of their budgets.

President Rodrigo Chaves Robles continued to engage with religious communities during the year. He publicly cited religious freedom as a fundamental Costa Rican value in August during his visit to the White House. He met with the Costa Rican Episcopal Conference, representing the Catholic Church, and with the FAEC to discuss topics of education, violence, quality of public services, and general welfare. Chaves also met with members of the Israelite Zionist Center to discuss topics of mutual concern.

Representatives of the New Republic political party, which has ties with evangelical Christian groups, occupied seven of the country's 57 legislative seats, compared with 14 seats held by political parties connected to evangelical Christian groups in the 2018-22 Legislative Assembly term. According to the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, 38 evangelical Christians continued to serve as representatives in 84 municipal governments. The FAEC again advised pastors to refrain from running for political office but did not advise against engaging in political issues. Catholic leaders continued to defend the right of the Catholic Church to engage in the political process.

In October, the Ministry of Public Education (MEP) and the National Technical University organized an interreligious meeting to promote “a culture of dialogue and peace,” which included members of the Costa Rican Interreligious Forum. During the event, an MEP official publicly affirmed the religious education curriculum was a means to promote moral values and respect for human rights, rather than a specific religious doctrine.

In February, the Legislative Assembly commemorated survivors and victims of the Holocaust through an event supported by the Israeli embassy. On September 22, legislators held a ceremony recognizing September as the month of the Bible.

In February, the Ombudsperson’s Office hosted a joint session with the Costa Rican Interreligious Forum to promote interreligious understanding and dialogue, in commemoration of the Global Week to Promote Interfaith Harmony.

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### Section III.

## Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In February, the Catholic Church reached a settlement in a civil case involving four individuals who stated they were sexually abused by former Catholic priest Mauricio Viquez Lizano. The terms of the settlement were not made public. In August 2022, the Second Court of First Civil Instance of the First Judicial Circuit of San Jose condemned and fined the Costa Rican Episcopal Conference, Jose Rafael Quiros Quiros, the Archbishop of San Jose, and the Temporal Assets [properties and revenues] of the Archdiocese of San Jose for the coverup of sexual abuse by Lizano, whom a court sentenced earlier that year to 20 years in prison for the rape and sexual abuse of a minor.

A UN study released in June found hate speech on social media in the country had grown by 50 percent compared to 2022. Of the 1.4 million posts analyzed, the study categorized 53,000, or approximately 2.5 percent, as having a connection to religion. The study noted this represented a decrease of 31 percent compared to the previous year and stated most of the negative messages against religion related to political ideology. The study covered the period from June 2022 through May 2023.

Jewish community leaders continued to report anti-Israel comments appearing on social media, some of which they said were antisemitic, although not directed at Jews living in the country and not due to generalized antisemitism at the national level. The Israelite Zionist Center of Costa Rica reported it detected antisemitic comments online through its



Antidiscrimination Web Observatory, which compiles antisemitic incidents and messages posted on social networks. The center stated it saw an increase in antisemitic language and criticism against Israel following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack. Jewish community leaders stated some online messages combined negative comments against Jewish persons with criticism of the state of Israel and Israel's military response to the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack. As in previous years, there were more general online comments that negatively equated Jewish heritage or faith with Israel-Palestinian issues. One comment responding to an article that highlighted a well-known soccer coach's Jewish faith mentioned Palestine and insinuated the coach, because of his Judaism, "supports terrorist murderers of innocents." Additional derogatory comments were directed at a prominent national political figure from the Jewish community.

Muslim leaders cited what they said was the country's societal embrace of religious tolerance, but continued to state there was a lack of societal awareness of Islamic religious practices and traditions that sometimes led to biased comments. Muslim community representatives stated they hosted student groups to help promote greater awareness and understanding of their faith in an effort to decrease incidents of discrimination and bias against Muslims. Officials from the Muslim community said they had not seen an increase in anti-Muslim sentiment following the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel.

The Costa Rican Interreligious Forum, an association of religious groups to encourage interreligious dialogue among its members, continued to promote dialogue among religious leaders, with participation of representatives from the Catholic, evangelical Christian, Protestant, Lutheran, Jewish, Baha'i, and Buddhist faiths and from Indigenous faiths.

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#### Section IV.

### U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

During the year, U.S. embassy representatives met with officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship to discuss policies and priorities regarding religious freedom and respect for religious diversity. Embassy representatives engaged with a representative from the Legislative Assembly to discuss legislative initiatives with an impact on religious freedom in the country. In February, representatives from the embassy attended an event at the Legislative Assembly to commemorate the survivors and victims of the Holocaust. The event provided embassy representatives an opportunity to raise issues of religious tolerance.



In May, embassy representatives visited the Omar Mosque and Muslim Cultural Center to discuss perspectives of the country's Muslim community. In September, embassy representatives met with the Israelite Zionist Center to discuss issues of importance to the Jewish community and solicit the organization's perspective on antisemitism in country. Also in September, embassy personnel engaged with representatives from the FAEC to discuss the organization's perspectives on religious freedom in the country and the status of churches within the alliance. In November, embassy representatives met with a representative from the Catholic Church to discuss his perspective on the state of religious freedom, the role of religious organizations in response to security and migration challenges, and policy areas of interest.

Embassy officials invited religious leaders to participate in major embassy events and receptions. In September, embassy officials hosted an interfaith roundtable with leaders from the Interreligious Forum, faith-based organizations, and Muslim, Jewish, and evangelical Christian communities to discuss their perspectives and the role of religious communities in responding to record levels of migration to and through the country as well as the state of religious freedom in the country.

The embassy continued to use social media to post congratulatory messages on special religious occasions, highlighting the U.S. values of tolerance and respect for religious diversity. Examples included the Ambassador's message recognizing the country's annual pilgrimage to honor the Virgin of the Angels, the country's patron saint.

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