

An official website of the United States Government [Here's how you know](#)

🕒 **Live Now:** Department Press Briefing

U.S. DEPARTMENT *of* STATE



[Home](#) > ... > Guatemala

2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Guatemala

IN THIS SECTION /
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, including freedom of worship and the free expression of all beliefs. The constitution recognizes the distinct legal personality of the Roman Catholic Church. Non-Catholic religious groups must register with the Ministry of Interior to sign contracts or receive tax-exempt status, after following a process involving several steps that could take up to two years and cost approximately 10,000 quetzals (\$1,300).

In January, Chicoyoguito community members, whom authorities arrested in 2021 for attempted trespassing on land that community members considered sacred spiritual sites, reached an agreement to avoid going to trial by pleading guilty to some of the trespassing charges. In May, former President Alejandro Giammattei signed an executive order to reduce the time required for religious groups to register. Although the constitution prohibits clergy from serving in executive office, an evangelical Protestant pastor ran for vice president in the June national elections, stating that, in his view, the provision in the constitution only applied to Catholic priests. The Supreme Court of Justice and Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) declined to consider constitutional challenges to the pastor's candidacy. Faith leaders continued to opine that the Presidential Commission on Religious Liberty commission should include Mayan Cosmovision representatives to make the commission fully inclusive and representative of the country's religious and societal diversity.

Mayan spiritual guides and practitioners reported continued societal discrimination and harassment, including accusations of witchcraft. They again reported that some evangelical Protestant congregations created obstacles restricting the ability of Mayan practitioners to worship. Some Catholic clergy and Mayan spiritual guides said they continued to receive anonymous threats, mostly on social media through internet trolls called “net centers,” because of their association with environmental protection, pro-democracy, anticorruption, and human rights work.

The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials engaged with government officials, religious groups, and civil society organizations to discuss issues of religious freedom, including threats against religious leaders and access for Mayan spiritual practitioners to their spiritual sites. In his meetings with representatives of Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and other faith traditions, the Ambassador reiterated the U.S. government’s commitment and dedication to freedom of religion or belief. During a November trip to the Western Highlands, the Chargé d’Affaires met with Indigenous leaders to understand their traditional governing structures, civic participation, and Indigenous spiritual beliefs. The embassy regularly facilitated engagement between the government and Indigenous communities, especially through support for increased dialogue and government investment in Indigenous communities. Embassy officials emphasized the value of tolerance and respect for religious diversity, including for religious minorities, in meetings with members of religious and various civil society groups. They also underscored the need to denounce and prevent violence against Mayan spiritual practitioners.

Section I.

Religious Demography.

The U.S. government estimates the country’s total population at 17.7 million (midyear 2023). According to a 2016 survey by ProDatos, approximately 45 percent of the population is Catholic, and 42 percent is non-Catholic Christian. Approximately 11 percent of the population profess no religious affiliation. Groups together constituting approximately 2 percent of the population include Buddhists; Hindus; Muslims; Jews; and spiritual practitioners of Mayan (Cosmovision), Xinka, and Afro-Indigenous Garifuna communities.

Non-Catholic Christian groups include the Full Gospel Church, Assemblies of God, Central American Church, Prince of Peace Church, independent evangelical Protestant groups, Baptists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Mennonites,

Episcopalians, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Russian Orthodox, and Seventh-day Adventists. According to media reports and representatives from the Catholic Church and the Church of Jesus Christ, evangelical Christianity continues to grow. While there is no central leadership, the Evangelical Alliance comprises approximately 67 percent of the country's evangelical Protestant congregations.

Catholics and Protestants live throughout the country, with adherents drawn from all major ethnic groups. According to leaders of Mayan spiritual organizations, as well as Catholic and Protestant clergy, many Indigenous Catholics and some Indigenous Protestants also blend Indigenous spiritual traditions with Catholic or Protestant practices, mainly in the eastern city of Livingston and in the southern region of the country. In the Western Highlands, syncretic practices are also prevalent.

According to Buddhist community representatives, there are between 8,000 and 11,000 Buddhists, composed principally of individuals from the Chinese immigrant community. Muslim leaders state there are approximately 2,000 Muslims of mostly Palestinian origin, who reside primarily in Guatemala City. According to local Ahmadi Muslims, there is a small Ahmadiyya Muslim community of approximately 70 members. According to Jewish community leadership, approximately 1,000 Jewish families live in the country.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution provides for freedom of expression and freedom of religion, stating, "Every person has the right to practice their religion or belief in public within the limits of public order and the respect due to the beliefs of other creeds." The constitution recognizes the distinct legal personality of the Catholic Church, and the government has a concordat with the Holy See.

The constitution does not require religious groups to register for the purpose of worship, but groups seeking to obtain tax-exempt status or to sign any kind of legal contract must register with the government. The Catholic Church receives these benefits without the requirement to register. To register, a religious group must file with the Ministry of Interior a copy of its bylaws, evidence that it is a newly established legal entity that intends to pursue religious objectives, and a list of its initial membership with at least 25 members. The ministry may

reject a registration application if it believes the group does not appear to be devoted to a religious objective, appears intent on undertaking illegal activities, or engages in activities that could threaten public order. Most applications are approved after a lengthy process. All religious groups must obtain the permission of the respective municipal authorities for construction and repair of properties and for holding public events, consistent with requirements for nonreligious endeavors.

The constitution protects the rights of Indigenous groups to practice their traditions and forms of cultural expression, including spiritual practices. The law permits Mayan spiritual groups to conduct ceremonies at Mayan historical sites on government-owned property free of charge with written permission from the Ministry of Culture. Anyone seeking access to the sites located in national parks or other protected areas, however, is required to pay processing or entrance fees.

The criminal code penalizes with one-month to one-year prison sentences the interruption of religious celebrations, "offending" a religion – which the law leaves vague – and the desecration of burial sites or human remains; however, charges are seldom filed under these laws.

According to the constitution, no member of the clergy of any religion may serve in the government as president, vice president, government minister, judge, magistrate, or tax superintendent or part of the Tax Authority Directory.

The law provides for at least one "religious space, according to [the prison's] capacity," in each prison. Chaplain services are limited to Catholic chaplains and nondenominational (usually evangelical) Protestant chaplains. The law does not specify that prisons must provide access for prisoners of minority religious groups to spiritual counselors from their faith.

The constitution permits, but does not require, religious instruction in public schools. There is no national framework for determining the nature or content of religious instruction. In general, public schools have no religious component in the curriculum. Private religious schools are permitted and are found in all areas of the country. Religious instruction is allowed, but attendance is optional in private religious schools.

The government requires foreign missionaries to obtain tourist visas to enter the country; visas are renewable every three months. After renewing their tourist visas once, foreign missionaries may apply for temporary residence for up to two years; the residential permit is renewable.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

On January 23, Chicoyoguito community members, whom in 2021 authorities arrested for attempted trespassing on land that community members considered sacred spiritual sites, reached an agreement to avoid going to trial by pleading guilty to some of the trespassing charges. Following the agreement, all other detained members were released from pretrial detention.

According to evangelical Protestant groups, non-Catholic religious groups still had to follow a vaguely defined process involving several steps that could take up to two years and cost approximately 10,000 quetzals (\$1,300) to register with the Ministry of Government and be able to sign any legal contracts or receive tax-exempt status. In May, former president Giammattei signed an executive order to reduce the amount of time it takes religious groups to register. According to Commissioner to the President on Religious Freedom Robin García, it was still too early to determine whether the executive order had led to a reduction in the time required for a religious group to register.

Although the constitution prohibits clergy from serving in executive office, evangelical Pastor Guerra Lemus ran for vice president alongside presidential candidate and former first-lady Sandra Torres in the June national elections. Guerra defended his candidacy, stating his view that the country's constitution only applied to Catholic priests. The Supreme Court of Justice and TSE declined to consider constitutional challenges to Guerra's candidacy. Guerra's bid as vice president was ultimately unsuccessful, but the judiciary and electoral commission's inaction likely contributed to public distrust in the electoral process.

The draft law on sacred sites, which the Committee on the Designation of Sacred Sites (COLUSAG) submitted to the country's congress in 2008, was still pending at year's end. According to a Mayan spiritual leader involved in drafting the bill, if passed, the resulting law would provide legally protected status for Mayan spiritual sites, making it a crime to damage or remove spiritual objects from them. The law would also establish a national council with legal authority to name holy sites and credential Mayan spiritual practitioners for the purposes of granting them access to protected sites.

Some Mayan leaders maintained that the government limited their access to several religious sites on government-owned property and required them to pay to access the sites, even though the Ministry of Culture approved free access to credentialed Mayan spiritual

practitioners. The same leaders said the government did not provide credentials in a timely manner to all practitioners who wished to access the sites. The government continued to deny any access limitations while noting that anyone seeking access to the sites located in national parks or other protected areas had to pay processing or entrance fees. In Tikal, a complex of Mayan pyramids dating from 200 A.D. and one of the most sacred sites for Mayan spirituality, the access fee was approximately 20 to 30 quetzals (\$3 to \$4), which, according to members of COLUSAG, was prohibitive for many Indigenous community members.

During the year, the Presidential Commission on Religious Liberty, established through executive agreement in 2022, did not become a full commission. In 2022, then-President Giammattei appointed Robin Garcia, an evangelical Protestant pastor in Antigua, as commissioner of the Presidential Commission on Religious Liberty and head of the Multireligious Table (*La Mesa Multireligiosa*). The Multireligious Table included representatives of registered religious groups across a broad spectrum of faiths. As commissioner, Garcia served as a conduit to the president. Faith actors continued to state that the commission should invite Mayan Cosmovision representatives to be fully inclusive and representative of the country's society. The commissioner and Mayan spiritual guides met in July and August, but Mayan spiritual guides did not participate in meetings with the Multireligious Table. Commissioner Garcia said they did not want to participate in part because they did not have a single leader who could represent the diversity of concerns and beliefs of the Mayan Cosmovision, which he likened to a philosophy rather than a religion. The Multireligious Table, however, included seven representatives of different evangelical Protestant associations. While certain minority religions said the commissioner and Multireligious Table considered their concerns, other interfaith actors said the primary role of this interfaith group was to build political favor with evangelical Protestant churches. For this reason, Mayan spiritual guides reported that they did not believe the Multireligious Table would genuinely represent their concerns.

During the year, the Multireligious Table met monthly, and former President Giammattei attended their meetings every other month. In March, Commissioner Garcia and the government organized the first Latin American Symposium on Religious Freedom, which included representatives from Argentina, Chile, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and a representative from Brigham Young University's International Center for Law and Religious Studies. Attendees discussed legal protections and data collection methods across Latin America to promote religious freedom and met with President Giammattei and other government officials. On October 25, the Multireligious Table convened religious representatives to commemorate International Day of Religious Freedom.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On November 23, the country's congress passed a formal resolution condemning the October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas in Israel, expressing solidarity with Israeli and Gazan victims of Hamas, and calling for the immediate release of hostages taken by Hamas. On December 14, the president of the Jewish community in Guatemala thanked the Guatemala and Israel Friendship League for its work to gain approval of the solidarity resolution. In December, the Jewish Community of Guatemala erected small billboards in Guatemala City that highlighted the stories of survivors, victims, and the families of victims killed or kidnapped during the October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas in Israel. On two separate occasions, unidentified persons spray painted swastikas on the billboards. Apart from these incidents, Jewish and interfaith organizations reported no antisemitic events during the year. Garcia and other interfaith group representatives reported there were no anti-Muslim incidents during the year.

Mayan spiritual leaders reported continued societal discrimination and harassment, including accusations of witchcraft. On July 24, Mayan spiritual guide Jose Baudilio Sis and practitioner Paulina Tzunun Otzoy reported to the Attorney General's Office that they were victims of discrimination by regional hospital staff in the city of Quetzaltenango. They said that on July 13, hospital authorities denied them access to a sacred Mayan site located within the hospital's premises and made derogatory comments regarding Baudilio and Tzunun's beliefs. After filing the complaint, authorities granted Baudilio and Tzunun access to the hospital.

Mayan spiritual practitioners continued to report that some evangelical Protestant leaders created obstacles to restrict Mayan spiritual practitioners' ability to worship. A consortium of Mayan spiritual leaders began meeting with the Evangelical Alliance during the year to increase awareness and understanding between the two groups. Mayan spiritual guides reported they were committed to continuing direct outreach with other faiths.

According to both Mayan spiritual guides and local Catholic leaders in the country's interior, residents in the interior sometimes blended Catholic and Mayan sacred traditions and practices. In Chichicastenango, Quiche, members of Mayan and Catholic communities reportedly made offerings in the Mayan tradition at sacred natural sites and attended Catholic Mass. In other places in the country, some individuals did not respect the blending of different faith traditions and spiritual practices.

Some Catholic clergy and Mayan spiritual guides continued to report receiving anonymous online threats, mostly through internet trolls called “net centers,” and harassment targeting them because of their association with environmental protection, prodemocracy, anticorruption, and human rights work. The net centers were reportedly funded by or managed by government institutions, private sector representatives, and far-right political groups informally linked to the government.

According to law enforcement professionals working in the penal system, gang members continued the practice of converting to evangelical Christianity in prison as an alternative to gangs and as an option to safely leave gangs; unless a gang member converted before leaving a gang, the gang would likely kill him or her for attempting to leave. Community evangelical Protestant leaders who visited prisons to provide aid and incarcerated religious community leaders who guided spiritual practices in prison conducted the conversions.

Landowners reportedly continued to deny access to locations on private property that Mayans consider sacred, including caves, lagoons, mountains, and forests. According to Mayan sources, there was no recourse available through the government for Mayans to obtain access to these private lands to perform rituals and leave offerings.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials engaged with the human rights ombudsman, officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and members of congress to discuss religious freedom issues, including threats against religious leaders and access for Mayan spiritual practitioners to their spiritual sites. Embassy officials engaged government officials as well as religious leaders on the need to denounce violence against Mayan spiritual practitioners and members of all other faiths. The embassy regularly facilitated engagement between the government and Indigenous communities, especially through support for increased dialogue and government investment in Indigenous communities, thereby enabling them to freely practice their traditions, including spiritual traditions, and express their culture. During a November trip to the Western Highlands, the Chargé d’Affaires met with Indigenous leaders to understand their traditional governing structures, civic participation, and Indigenous spiritual beliefs.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials frequently met with leaders of Catholic and other Christian religious groups in the country and representatives of faith-based

organizations to discuss the importance of tolerance and respect for members of religious minority groups. During the year, the Ambassador met multiple times with leaders from diverse religious backgrounds, including Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist leaders, to reiterate the U.S. government’s commitment to freedom of religion or belief and discuss cooperation in supporting broader human rights in the country. In December, the embassy invited an expert to host a seminar on Mayan Cosmovision and its impact on other spiritual beliefs and cultural practices in Latin America.

TAGS

[Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs](#)

[Guatemala](#)

[Office of International Religious Freedom](#)

[Religious Freedom](#)

White House

USA.gov

Office of the Inspector General

Archives

Contact Us



Privacy Policy

Accessibility Statement

Copyright Information

FOIA

No FEAR Act