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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Peru

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution bars discrimination based on religious affiliation or belief and provides for freedom of conscience and religion, either individually or in association with others. It provides for the separation of religion and state but also recognizes the historic importance of the Roman Catholic Church.

On July 25, President Dina Boluarte participated in an interfaith prayer ceremony organized by the Interreligious Council of Peru (Interreligious Council), a nongovernmental organization (NGO) whose member organizations include most religious groups in the country. The council said the event was an effort to deescalate tensions resulting from the violent protests that followed the impeachment of former president Pedro Castillo and Boluarte's installation as president in December 2022. There were 168 non-Catholic religious groups registered with the government – including the newly registered Union of Evangelical Christian Churches of Peru – compared with 174 in 2022. Evangelical missionaries cited longer waiting periods and a lack of transparency in approval procedures for visas during the year and said the government did not afford them the same privileges as the Catholic Church. The Interreligious Council continued to engage the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights (MOJ) to promote religious freedom principles, such as equal access to government benefits for all religious groups and the opportunity to serve as military chaplains. The council said the government

took no action on most of the recommendations it made to former president Castillo before he was impeached.

A group characterized as far right and extremist threatened and harassed a Jewish journalist investigating police violence. The group held an antisemitic demonstration in front of his home, posted his address to social media, and encouraged further harassment against him. At an Interreligious Council prayer event in July, the council, multiple representatives of religious associations, and NGOs pledged to provide humanitarian assistance to vulnerable families through the council's humanitarian organization, Religions for Peace. In November, a leading newspaper ran a cartoon comparing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Hitler. After the Israeli and German embassies issued a statement criticizing the comparison, the newspaper published an editorial stating the cartoon was a "political caricature" rather than antisemitic.

U.S. embassy officials continued to engage government officials to reaffirm the U.S. government's commitment to upholding religious freedom. Embassy officials emphasized the importance of equitable tax and education policies applicable to all religious groups and expanding the military chaplaincy to include non-Catholics. Embassy officials also met with representatives of the Interreligious Council, the Catholic Church, the Islamic Association, and members of the Interreligious Council for Refugees and Migrants (CIREMI) to discuss their efforts to promote tolerance and interreligious dialogue, including through assistance to migrants and refugees. Embassy officials met with Jewish community leaders to discuss their heightened security concerns following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel. Palestinian community leaders initially declined to meet with embassy officials but subsequently expressed a willingness to again engage with the embassy.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 32.4 million (mid-year 2023). The 2017 national census (the most recent) reported the population as 76 percent Catholic; 14 percent Protestant (mainly evangelical Protestant); 5.1 percent nonreligious; and 4.9 percent other religious groups. Other religious groups include Israelites of the New Universal Pact (an evangelical Christian group that blends biblical and Andean religious beliefs, with an emphasis on communal farming life), Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), Jews, Muslims, Baha'is, Buddhists, Orthodox Christians, and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

According to the World Jewish Congress, approximately 3,000 Jews reside in the country, primarily in Lima (central Peru), in Cusco (in the south), and in Iquitos (the northeast region). The Islamic Association of Peru reported approximately 3,000 Muslims living in the country – 2,800 in the city of Lima and 200 in the Tacna region, compared with 2,000 in Lima and 600 in Tacna region in 2022. Lima's Muslim community is approximately half Arab in origin and half local converts, while Tacna's Muslim community is mostly Pakistani in origin. Most Muslims in the country are Sunni. Nearly 50 percent of the country's ethnic Palestinian population identifies as Christian. According to current MOJ records of optional registrations and renewals, there are approximately 14,020 Buddhists, 2,820 Hindus, 4,915 Jews, and 4,000 Muslims registered in the country.

Some individuals in the Andes and the Amazon regions practice traditional Indigenous faiths. Many practice a syncretic faith that blends Catholicism and pre-Columbian beliefs. The MOJ does not have data on the numbers of followers of Indigenous religious beliefs.

Section II.

Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution bars discrimination and persecution based on religious affiliation or belief and provides for freedom of religion, either individually or in association with others. It states every person has the right to privacy of religious conviction. It establishes the separation of religion and state but recognizes the Catholic Church's role as "an important element in the historical, cultural, and moral foundation" of the country.

An agreement (concordat) between the government and the Holy See confers on Catholic Church workers certain institutional privileges in education, taxation, and immigration. A religious freedom law exempts Catholic Church buildings, houses, and other real estate holdings from property taxes. Other religious groups often must pay property taxes on their schools and clerical residences, depending on the municipal jurisdiction and whether the group seeks and/or receives tax-exempt status as a nonprofit organization. The law further exempts Catholic religious workers from taxes on international travel. The government also exempts all work-related earnings of Catholic priests and bishops from income taxes.

By law, the military and prison system may employ only Catholic clergy as chaplains, but other faiths and religious groups may provide counsel to members of the military or prisoners. By law, all individuals employed by the armed forces, police, prisons, hospitals, and other public institutions, regardless of their religious affiliation, may practice their religion and request and benefit from the religious assistance of someone of the same faith.

The MOJ is responsible for engaging with religious groups, through the Office of Catholic Church Affairs or the Office of Interconfessional Affairs for all other religious groups.

Registration with the MOJ is optional. The stated purpose of the registry is to promote a religious group's integrity and to facilitate a productive relationship with the government. There is no minimum number of members required for a religious entity to register, but groups must have been resident in the country for at least seven years to qualify. Religious groups do not have to register to obtain institutional benefits, but registration grants them legal status (as a business or nongovernmental organization) and allows them to engage directly with the government in that capacity, facilitating communication and potential requests for institutional benefits. Government regulations allow all religious groups, registered or not, to apply for tax exemptions and worker or resident visas directly with the pertinent government institutions. Registration is free, the process usually takes one week, and the MOJ helps groups complete the application forms.

The Ministry of Education mandates all schools, public and private, to provide a course on religion through the primary and secondary levels, but the law specifies that schools provide such a course "without violating the freedom of conscience of the student, parents, or teachers." Public schools teach Catholicism in religion class, and the Ministry of Education requires the presiding Catholic bishop of an area to approve the public schools' religious education teachers. Parents may request an exemption for their children from mandatory religion classes. The government may also grant exemptions from the religious education requirement to private secular and non-Catholic, private religious schools. The law states schools may not academically disadvantage students seeking exemptions from Catholic education classes.

According to an unimplemented 2018 Constitutional Court ruling, government financing for schools operated by Catholic religious groups is unconstitutional because it is "incompatible with the principle of secularism." The ruling provides that the state must suspend funding for these schools within a reasonable period or establish a general and secular system of subsidies for all private educational institutions regardless of their religious affiliation.

The law requires all employers to accommodate religious holidays for all employees; this accommodation includes allowing an employee to use annual vacation time for this purpose.

Foreign religious workers, including Catholics, must apply for a visa through the National Migration Directorate (SNM) within the Ministry of Interior. If the religious group is registered with the MOJ, the SNM accepts this as proof the applicant group is a religious organization. If the group is not registered with the MOJ, the SNM makes its decision on a case-by-case basis.

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

During the country's official Independence Day celebration on July 25, President Boluarte, various government ministers, and civil society leaders participated in an interfaith prayer ceremony called "We Pray for Peru 2023" organized by the Interreligious Council. According to the council, the prayer ceremony was one of a series of activities it organized to deescalate tensions resulting from violent protests that followed the impeachment of former president Castillo and Boluarte's installation as president in December 2022. The council includes the Catholic Church, Islamic Association of Peru, Jewish Association of Peru, Baha'i Community of Peru, Brahma Kumaris of Peru, Methodist Church of Peru, and Union of Evangelical Churches of Peru, among others.

During the year, the government's registry listed 168 non-Catholic groups, compared with 174 in 2022. The reduction was reportedly due to groups opting not to maintain their registration rather than decisions by the government to deregister any religious groups. The Union of Evangelical Christian Churches of Peru, a group that represents more than 20 evangelical churches, registered for the first time during the year. According to the MOJ, the government accepted and approved applications from all interested religious groups except for two, the International Stars and Sand Mission and the Jesus Christ the Missionary Ecumenical Foundation Church. Neither group met the requirement to have been based in the country for seven years.

According to the MOJ's Office of Catholic Affairs, the government provided an annual grant of approximately 2.6 million soles (\$707,000) to the Catholic Church for stipends to Archbishops and pastors, in accordance with the concordat with the Holy See. The MOJ Director of Catholic Affairs said this annual amount had not changed since 1991. Financial aid provided by the government was distributed among the 45 ecclesiastical jurisdictions around the country to support the maintenance and repair of Catholic infrastructure considered to hold significant

cultural and historical value. Government funding also supported seminars, scholarships, and the payment of personal subsidies to some Catholic clergy and laypersons employed by the Church. These individuals represented approximately 7 percent of the Catholic clergy and pastoral agents nationwide. The government did not provide stipends to other religious groups.

Ministry of Education officials said the government took no action to implement the Constitutional Court's 2018 ruling that government financing for schools operated by religious groups was unconstitutional and that the government must establish a secular system of subsidies for all private schools regardless of religious affiliation. The officials said designing and implementing such large-scale changes would take significant time, and they did not say when the government would make those changes.

The Interreligious Council met with the MOJ to advocate egalitarian treatment of religious groups, such as providing equal access to government benefits for all religious groups – including tax exemptions on income, imports, property, and sales, visas for religious workers, and the opportunity to serve as military chaplains. These were all benefits for which the Catholic Church automatically qualified but for which other religious groups must apply. Non-Catholic religious leaders continued to say it was difficult for non-Catholic soldiers to find and attend non-Catholic religious services because only Catholic chaplains could serve in the military.

Evangelical missionaries noted longer waiting periods for visas during the year, citing a lack of transparency in processing and approval procedures. They also stated that, while the registration process facilitated communication with the government, the government continued to view evangelical groups as associations, not as churches, and did not afford them the same privileges as the Catholic Church. Outside of Lima, the evangelical missionaries said, the Catholic Church had substantial influence in societal and political dealings and more leeway – for example, through a centuries-old network of organizations from grassroots to the top levels of power, widely and immediately recognizable by citizens – in overcoming obstacles to their local initiatives.

During the year, the Boluarte administration did not take official action on agreements made between the Castillo administration and the Interreligious Council. Prior to his arrest in 2022, Castillo reportedly said that the government would “follow up” on the council's recommendations, which included creating a public policy on religious freedom under a formal agreement between the council and the MOJ, designating a national Religious Freedom Day, holding an interreligious prayer service on national holidays, and permitting prayer at

official government celebrations. Government officials participated in several organized prayer services, and the government permitted prayers to be offered at several official events throughout the year, but it did not take any further action regarding the previous president's agreements.

From January to March, heavy rainfall caused severe flooding and landslides throughout the country, adversely affecting more than 130,000 persons. Religious organizations, including local churches and the Interreligious Council, served as frontline responders during this crisis, as they had in previous years, particularly in remote areas. On October 16, the MOJ convened government officials, civil society, international organizations, and religious associations to share best practices to decentralize aid and avoid duplication of efforts in disaster relief. The initiative, titled the "First Working Group of Foundations and Religious Entities for Social Assistance," included religious associations among the organizations acting as first responders in disaster relief.

On October 15, the Interreligious Council coordinated a Prayer for Peace in Lima with local religious leaders, including a sheikh, rabbi, Archbishop, and others, to promote religious tolerance and unity and to pray for peace in the Hamas-Israel and Ukraine-Russia conflicts.

On October 18, the MOJ held a conference for religious entities in the southern city of Arequipa called "Right to Religious Freedom and Culture of Peace" that affirmed the importance of the right of individuals to practice religious or spiritual beliefs according to their own conscience. Representatives from the Interreligious Council attended, among others.

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In February, a group of approximately 30 persons carried posters with antisemitic figures and yelled antisemitic chants that included threats (e.g., "We will keep visiting this Jew, his days are numbered.") during a protest outside the home of prominent Jewish Peruvian journalist Gustavo Gorriti, according to the Jewish Telegraph Agency. The group was protesting recent stories on Gorriti's news website that described investigations into police violence in Ayacucho during the country's continuing political unrest. The protesters were characterized as members of the far-right extremist group La Resistencia, according to the NGO Committee to Protect Journalists; La Resistencia published Gorriti's address on social media, as well as videos of the protest, and encouraged followers to harass him. On his website, Gorriti said the protest was the fourth incident against him in a month. In response, the Jewish Association of

Peru said, "We emphatically reject the harassment and threats laden with antisemitic racism [against Gorriti]" and called on Peruvians to look for "spaces of dialogue and understanding."

The Interreligious Council stated its goal was to "promote just and harmonious societies within a framework of respect, tolerance, and dialogue between different faith traditions." At the council's July "Pray for Peru" event, the council, multiple representatives of religious associations, and NGOs pledged to provide humanitarian assistance, such as food, housing, and shelter, to vulnerable families in the country through the council's humanitarian organization, Religions for Peace.

Religious groups and faith-based organizations continued to coordinate with the government, civil society, and international organizations to provide humanitarian assistance, regardless of religious affiliation, to an estimated 1.6 million displaced Venezuelans who entered the country since 2017. The Catholic Church and various evangelical Protestant churches in Tumbes continued to work with the government, the International Organization for Migration, and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to provide temporary housing to Venezuelan migrants at the northern border. The Interreligious Council said Venezuelan migrants attended religious meetings offered by volunteers and in local churches without interference.

On November 1, following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel and Israel's response, national newspaper *La Republica* ran a cartoon of Adolf Hitler giving a Nazi salute with the words, "Heil [Israeli Prime Minister] Netanyahu!". On November 2, the Israeli and German Ambassadors in Lima issued a joint statement calling for the rejection of all forms of antisemitism, denouncing hate, and criticizing the comparison as inappropriate, incorrect, and disparaging to Holocaust victims. On November 3, *La Republica* published an editorial stating that equating Hitler with Netanyahu was "a political caricature and does not represent an antisemitic campaign," while adding that the newspaper recognized the "asymmetry in the comparison" as indicated in the statement by the Israeli and German embassies.

There were reports of thefts from churches during the year, as part of a broad increase in crime nationwide, but no reports indicating that churches were specifically targeted. In February, unknown perpetrators stole cash from the St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Catacaos, Piura Department. Police were investigating but reported being overwhelmed with many cases of armed robbery, petty theft, and other crime. In January, police arrested five men suspected of robbing a church in San Clemente District, Pisco Province. No further information on either case was available at year's end.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

During the year, U.S. embassy officials met with officials from the MOJ to reaffirm the U.S. government's commitment to upholding religious freedom. Embassy representatives raised with government officials the importance of implementing equitable tax and education policies applicable to all religious groups and expanding the military chaplaincy to include non-Catholics.

Embassy officials met with representatives of the Interreligious Council, as well as the Catholic Church, the Islamic Association, and members of CIREMI, to discuss their efforts to promote tolerance and interreligious dialogue, including through assistance to migrants and refugees, a shared priority. Embassy leadership hosted an iftar on April 12 to build relationships with Muslim community leaders in the country. Representatives from the Islamic Association of Peru and civil society attended the event, aimed at fostering freedom of religion, tolerance, mutual understanding, and societal inclusion. On November 3, embassy officials met with leaders of the Jewish Association of Peru, which represents the country's Jewish community domestically and internationally, to discuss their heightened security concerns following the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel. Palestinian community leadership declined embassy officials' invitation for a meeting in early November but later expressed a willingness to again engage with the embassy.

During the year, the embassy published 99 social media posts via the embassy's X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram accounts and six press releases to promote human rights and inclusion. These messages endorsed diversity and the protection of religious freedom.

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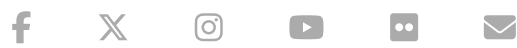
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