

PERU 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

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. Small non-Catholic religious groups said they were pleased with the 2018 temporary removal of the prerequisite to register with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) to receive certain tax and visa benefits and other government services. Some members of religious minorities, however, continued to state the religious freedom law maintained institutional preferences for the Catholic Church, particularly regarding tax exemptions, and they sought a permanent change in government policy to allow exemptions for all religious groups. The Interreligious Council of Peru continued to engage the MOJ for equal access to government benefits for all religious groups, including taxation exemptions on income, imports, property, and sales; visas for religious workers; and the opportunity to serve as military chaplains. The council continued to discuss the government's revisions of its religious freedom regulations with religious communities. In June the MOJ hosted a panel of experts on religious liberty and the principles of secularism and the neutrality of the state. Panelists of the Pontifical Catholic University analyzed and explained a December 2018 Constitutional Court ruling that government financing for schools run by religious groups was unconstitutional because it was incompatible with the principle of secularism. Some members of the Catholic Church questioned the ruling, stating secularism was not mentioned in the constitution. In January Junín Department Governor Vladimir Cerrón tweeted, "If the Left coordinates its unity well, it will successfully face the Jewish-Peruvian powers in the next general elections," in reference to Cerrón's alleging Jewish control of the country's politics and economy. Political figures and media criticized Cerrón's statement as anti-Semitic.

Jewish community leaders said some individuals continued to engage in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories about Jews and Israel. Both Jewish and Muslim leaders again said some public and private schools and employers did not give their members annual vacation leave for religious holidays. Religious groups and interfaith organizations coordinated with the government, civil society, and international organizations to provide humanitarian assistance to more than 860,000 displaced Venezuelans in the country.

U.S. embassy officials continued to discuss the religious freedom law, including tax exemptions for religious groups, and its implementing regulations with government representatives; emphasized the importance of equal treatment of all religious groups under the law; and discussed how religious groups were assisting the humanitarian response to displaced Venezuelans in the country. Embassy officials also promoted tolerance and respect for religious diversity with leaders from the Catholic Church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the evangelical Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 31.6 million (midyear 2019 estimate). The 2017 national census reported the population as 76 percent Catholic (81 percent in 2007); 14 percent Protestant (mainly evangelical Protestant, compared with 13 percent in 2007); 5.1 percent nonreligious; and 4.9 percent other religious groups. The other religious groups include Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ, Israelites of the New Universal Pact (who define themselves as evangelical Protestant), Baha'is, Buddhists, Orthodox Christians (primarily Russian and Greek), and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

According to the World Jewish Congress, approximately 3,000 Jews reside in the country, primarily in Lima, Cusco, and Iquitos. According to the Islamic Association of Peru, there are approximately 2,600 Muslims, 2,000 in Lima and 600 in the Tacna region. Lima's Muslim community is approximately half Arab in origin and half local converts, while Tacna's is mostly Pakistani. The majority of Muslims are Sunni.

Some indigenous peoples in the far eastern Amazonian jungles practice traditional faiths. Many indigenous communities, particularly Catholics in the Andean highlands, practice a syncretic faith blending Christian and pre-Columbian 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 development" of the country.

A concordat between the government and the Holy See accords the Catholic Church certain institutional privileges in education, taxation, and immigration of religious workers. 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 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. In December 2018 a temporary exemption of these taxes was approved for non-Catholic religious groups, valid until December 31, 2020. By law, the military may employ only Catholic clergy as chaplains.

The MOJ is responsible for engaging with religious groups.

Registration with the MOJ's Directorate of Justice and Religious Freedom is optional and voluntary. The stated purpose of the registry is to promote integrity and facilitate a relationship with the government. Religious groups do not have to register to obtain institutional benefits but doing so allows them to engage with the government. The 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 in completing the application forms.

According to the law, all prisoners, regardless of their religious affiliation, may practice their religion and seek the ministry of someone of their same faith.

The law mandates all schools, public and private, to provide religious education through the primary and secondary levels, "without violating the freedom of conscience of the student, parents, or teachers." The law permits only the teaching of Catholicism in public schools, and the Ministry of Education requires the presiding Catholic bishop of an area to approve the public schools' religious education teachers. Parents may request the school principal to exempt their children from mandatory religion classes. The government may grant exemptions from the religious education requirement to secular private schools and non-Catholic religious schools. Non-Catholic children attending Catholic schools are also exempt from classes on Catholicism. The law states schools may not

academically disadvantage students seeking exemptions from Catholic education classes. According to a December 2018 Constitutional Court ruling, government financing for schools run by religious groups is unconstitutional because it is “incompatible with the principle of secularism.” The ruling provides 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 the religious days and holidays of all employees; this accommodation includes allowing an employee to use annual vacation leave for this purpose.

Foreign religious workers must apply for a visa through the Office of Immigration of the Ministry of Interior. If the religious group registers with the MOJ, the Immigration Office accepts this as proof the applicant group is a religious organization. If the group does not register with the MOJ, the Immigration Office 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

At year’s end, the government had registered 148 non-Catholic groups, an increase from 133 in 2018. According to the MOJ and local interfaith groups, the government accepted and approved the applications from all interested religious groups, and there were no reported denials. The government ended minimum membership requirements in 2018, allowing any group to register voluntarily regardless of its size or categorization.

According to the Interreligious Council and faith groups, the MOJ continued to engage religious communities on matters affecting the communities, including the registration process, tax exemptions, religious worker visas, budgetary support for religious groups, and prisoners’ rights to religious practice. The MOJ continued to interact regularly with the religious groups through its Office of Catholic Affairs and the Office of Interfaith Affairs for non-Catholic Religious Groups.

Some members of religious minorities continued to criticize aspects of the country’s religious freedom law, stating it maintained institutional preferences for the Catholic Church, particularly regarding tax exemptions. In its regular meetings with the MOJ, the Interreligious Council continued to press for permanent equal

access to government benefits for all religious groups, including tax exemptions on income, import duties, property, and sales; visas for religious workers; and opportunities to serve as military chaplains.

According to the MOJ's Office of Catholic Affairs, the government provided an annual grant of approximately 2.6 million soles (\$785,000) to the Catholic Church for stipends to archbishops and pastors, in accordance with the 1980 concordat with the Holy See. Each of the 45 Catholic ecclesiastical jurisdictions in the country also received a monthly subsidy of 1,000 soles (\$300) for maintenance and repairs of church buildings, often of significant historical and cultural value. Some Catholic clergy and laypersons employed by the Church received subsidies from the government in addition to these funds. These individuals represented approximately 8 percent of the Catholic clergy and pastoral agents. According to Catholic Church representatives, the Church used these and other Church funds to provide humanitarian services to the poor, regardless of their religious affiliation or nonaffiliation. Similar stipends were not available to other religious groups.

Protestant pastors again stated that some non-Catholic soldiers continued to have difficulty finding and attending non-Catholic religious services because by law, only Catholic chaplains may serve in the military.

In January Junin Department Governor Cerron tweeted, "If the Left coordinates its unity well, it will successfully face the Jewish-Peruvian powers in the next general elections," in reference to Cerron's alleging Jewish control of the country's politics and economy. In February, two months before dying by suicide, former president Alan Garcia said a journalist who accused him of stopping the fight against corruption had "brought the Jewish mafia of (Josef) Maiman" (an Israeli-Peruvian real estate developer allegedly involved with corruption) to the country. Some political leaders, including then congressman Alberto de Belaunde, who called anti-Semitism "unacceptable," and media reports criticized the remarks by Cerron and Garcia as anti-Semitic. The Jewish Association of Peru characterized Garcia's comments as discriminatory and stated they could not accept "expressions that feed conspiracy ideas that have nothing to do with reality." In response, Garcia said his comments were a lapse due to the speed of the interview.

Government engagement with religious groups included regular conferences, workshops, and other interfaith meetings to discuss the registration process, joint charity campaigns, public outreach, and cultural events. The government and religious groups, including the Catholic Church, the Church of Jesus Christ, and various Protestant churches, cohosted these engagements for the entire community.

In June MOJ officials, including Vice Minister Fernando Castaneda and Director for Interfaith Affairs Maria Esperanza Adrianzen, and various religious representatives from Latin America and the Caribbean associated with the international organization Religions for Peace held an interreligious regional consultation in Lima to promote social development and interfaith dialogue. The consultation focused on an interfaith vision for peace, tolerance, conflict prevention, promotion of sustainable development, and environmental protection. It also included a special session on the role of religious communities in response to the Venezuelan migration crisis in the region. At the event, President Martin Vizcarra received Religions for Peace’s award for “Positive Peace.”

In June the MOJ hosted an expert panel on religious liberty and the principles of secularism and the neutrality of the state, specifically analyzing and explaining the Constitutional Court’s December 2018 ruling regarding public financing for private religious schools. Some members of the Catholic Church criticized the ruling, stating that secularism was not mentioned in the constitution, while it recognized the Church’s important role in the country’s history and culture. The government continued to work on an implementation timeline for the 2018 ruling through year’s end.

In March the minister of women and vulnerable populations addressed a conference organized by the Interreligious Council focused on combating violence against women. The minister noted the leading role of faith communities in fostering democratic, healthy, and respectful spaces where equality between men and women can be promoted. In October the MOJ invited religious leaders in the city of Chiclayo to participate in an initiative called “Caravan of Justice” to develop an agenda promoting tolerance, solidarity, and social welfare as a joint objective of both the state and religious communities.

The Peruvian Falun Dafa Association stated that as a result of Chinese embassy interference, the Falun Gong-affiliated performance troupe Shen Yun was unable to reserve public venues through the Ministry of Culture for their commercial performances. The association said because Shen Yun could not secure appropriately sized venues, it did not perform during the year.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Interreligious Council continued to promote just and harmonious societies within a framework of respect, tolerance, and dialogue between different faith

traditions. It continued its dialogue among religious entities, including evangelical and other Protestant groups, as well as Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Eastern Orthodox, and Church of Jesus Christ representatives, whose members in November attended the inauguration of the Church of Jesus Christ Temple in Arequipa. The council continued to engage religious communities on the government’s revised religious freedom regulations, the protection of religious freedom, and assistance to displaced Venezuelans.

Jewish community leaders said some individuals continued to engage in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories on social media, particularly in reaction to statements made by former governor Vladimir Cerron and former president Alan Garcia. In media, most responses condemned Cerron’s and Garcia’s statements and postings. A few individuals, however, posted social media comments, such as “his (Cerron’s) were not an assault against Jews, just a critique of their political and economic power.”

Muslim and Jewish community members again stated some public and private schools and employers occasionally required their members to use accumulated leave for non-Catholic religious holidays, including Eid al-Fitr and Yom Kippur, an option in accordance with the law.

Religious groups and interfaith organizations continued to coordinate with the government, civil society, and international organizations to provide humanitarian assistance, regardless of their religious affiliation, to more than 860,000 displaced Venezuelans entering the country since 2015. Various evangelical Protestant and Catholic churches in Tumbes continued to work with the government, the International Organization for Migration, and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to provide temporary housing to the increasing number of Venezuelan migrants entering through the northern border. In April members of the Interreligious Council met with UNHCR representatives to coordinate UNHCR’s responses to this crisis, particularly with respect to shelter, health, education, and providing advice on migration status.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials again encouraged the government to apply impartially the religious freedom law and its implementing regulations to all religious groups. Embassy officials discussed implementation of the revised regulations with MOJ officials and advocated for additional changes to promote government respect for religious diversity and the equal treatment of all religious groups under the law.

The embassy engaged both government and civil society participants on religious freedom topics, including during an interfaith gathering in April focused on religious freedom and tolerance at the Church of Jesus Christ temple in Lima.

Embassy officials met with representatives of the Interreligious Council, academics, Catholic Church, Protestant and evangelical Protestant groups, Church of Jesus Christ, and Jewish and Muslim communities to discuss equal treatment of religious groups, anti-Semitism, the government's implementation of the revised religious freedom regulations, and the voluntary registration of religious groups. Embassy officials encouraged religious groups to work together to provide humanitarian assistance to Venezuelan migrants in the country.