

# PERU 2020 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. During the year, the government registered 156 non-Catholic groups, an increase from 148 in 2019. Among the newly registered groups were the Religious Association of the Good Seed of Majes, House of Prayer for All Nations, and Ministry of God's Assemblies Abreu e Lima, all evangelical Protestant. In January, the People's Agrarian Front of Peru (FREPA), a political party founded by and directly affiliated to the Israelites of the New Universal Pact religious group, obtained 8.4 percent of the vote and 15 seats in congress, the largest congressional representation of a non-Catholic religious party in the country's history. The Interreligious Council of Peru continued to engage the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights (MOJ) for 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, all benefits for which the Catholic Church automatically qualifies but for which other religious groups must apply. The council continued to discuss the government's religious freedom regulations, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Interreligious Council continued to promote respect, tolerance, and dialogue among different faith traditions, including through a virtual event on the International Day of Tolerance that highlighted respect for migrants, refugees, and displaced persons. Muslim and Jewish community members continued to state 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.

U.S. embassy officials continued to engage with government officials regarding religious freedom, and they discussed how religious groups were assisting the humanitarian response to Venezuelan migrants in the country, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. While restrictions related to COVID-19 made events and in-person outreach difficult, embassy officials engaged representatives of the Interreligious Council and encouraged religious groups to work together to provide humanitarian assistance to those most affected by the COVID-19 health emergency and its subsequent economic crisis, including Venezuelan migrants in the country.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 32 million (midyear 2020 estimate). The 2017 national census reported the population as 76 percent Catholic (down from 81 percent in 2007); 14 percent Protestant (mainly evangelical Protestant, up from 13 percent in 2007); 5.1 percent nonreligious (up from 2.9 percent in 2007); and 4.9 percent other religious groups (up from 3.3 in 2007). The other religious groups include Israelites of the New Universal Pact (an evangelical Christian religious group of local origin 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, 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. Most Muslims are Sunni.

Some indigenous peoples in the Andes and the Amazon practice traditional faiths. Many indigenous citizens from the Andes practice a syncretic faith, blending Catholicism 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 foundation" of the country.

A concordat between the government and the Holy See signed in 1980 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. A 2018 temporary exemption of these taxes for non-Catholic religious groups was in place through December 31. By law, the military may employ only Catholic clergy as chaplains.

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 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 directly 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.

By 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 a course on religion through the primary and secondary levels, “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 the school principal to exempt their children from mandatory religion classes. The government may grant exemptions from the religious education requirement to secular and non-Catholic private schools. Non-Catholic children attending public 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 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 National Superintendency for Migration (SNM) of the Ministry of Interior. If the religious group registers with the MOJ, the SNM accepts this as proof the applicant group is a religious organization. If the group does not register 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 year, the government registered 156 non-Catholic groups, an increase from 148 in 2019. Among the newly registered groups were the Religious Association of the Good Seed of Majes, House of Prayer for All Nations, and the Peruvian chapter of the Ministry of God's Assemblies Abreu e Lima, all evangelical Protestant groups. 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.

Minister of Justice and Human Rights Ana Cristina Neyra Zegarra met virtually in October with leaders of Protestant and evangelical Christian associations, the Church of Jesus Christ, and the Islamic Association of Peru. Neyra Zegarra thanked the religious minorities for their societal contributions and assured them the government guaranteed the right of religious freedom. The minister stated in-person religious ceremonies at houses of worship, suspended since March due to COVID-19, would resume under strict public-health-based criteria and would not discriminate against or privilege any group.

FREPAP, a political party founded by and directly affiliated with the Israelites of the New Universal Pact religious group, obtained 8.4 percent of the national vote in the January 26 parliamentary election. The result granted FREPAP 15 seats in congress, its best performance since the party's founding in 1989, and the largest congressional representation of a non-Catholic religious party in the country's

history. All 15 FREPAP members of congress were members of the Israelites of the New Universal Pact.

According to the MOJ's Office of Catholic Affairs, the government provided an annual grant of approximately 2.6 million soles (\$718,000) 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 (\$280) for maintenance and repairs of church buildings, some of them 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.

The Interreligious Council of Peru continued to engage the MOJ for 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, all benefits for which the Catholic Church automatically qualifies but for which other religious groups must apply. The council continued to discuss the government's religious freedom regulations, particularly in the context of COVID-19.

Protestant pastors said 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.

The 2018 Constitutional Court ruling against government funding of schools operated by religious organizations did not go into effect while the government reviewed its implementation.

### **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. In November, the council held a virtual event to observe the International Day for Tolerance, bringing together various religious groups and international organizations such as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for

Refugees and the International Organization for Migration to demonstrate support by faith communities for migrants, refugees, and displaced persons in the country.

Muslim and Jewish community members continued to state 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 one 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.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy officials continued to engage with government officials regarding religious freedom, and they discussed how religious groups were assisting the humanitarian response to Venezuelan migrants in the country, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While restrictions related to COVID-19 made events and in-person outreach difficult, embassy officials engaged representatives of the Interreligious Council and encouraged religious groups to work together to provide humanitarian assistance to those most affected by the COVID-19 health emergency and its subsequent economic crisis, including Venezuelan migrants in the country. In November, embassy officials participated in the Interreligious Council's virtual event commemorating the International Day for Tolerance.