

# INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



USCCB Fact Sheet

## Local Majority Rule Threatens Minority Rights in Mexico

In Mexico, the number of religious freedom violations has risen in recent years. The Catholic Media Center has consistently called Mexico the most violent country for Roman Catholic priests in Latin America. Priests and other religious leaders are often threatened, kidnapped, and killed by criminal gangs wanting ransom, although some are targeted because of their advocacy for human rights.

Although Mexico has signed many international human rights treaties and their constitution guarantees freedom of religion, it also has a Law of Uses and Customs. This law gives considerable autonomy to places where there is a large indigenous population and grants certain rights, "including the right to implement their own social, economic, political, and cultural organization and the right to maintain and enrich their language and culture."

The majority of the violations of religious freedom linked to the Law of Uses and Customs is concentrated in the Mexican states of Puebla, Hidalgo, Oaxaca, Guerrero and Chiapas. Under this Law, religious majority local communities have taken it upon themselves to make life difficult for religious minorities. In the most benign form, this can involve levying fees to support religious festivals of the majority, or fines for non-participation. In other instances, water and electricity are cut off or children from the religious minority are denied the right to attend school. Such discrimination can escalate into beatings, imprisonment, forced displacement from homes and lands, and to even murder. But because of the Law, federal and state governments have been slow to hold people accountable for these human rights abuses or to protect religious minorities.

For example, in Chiapas state, despite a National Human Rights Commission of Mexico ruling that Protestants should be allowed to return to their homes after being forcibly displaced, a group of Protestants was stoned and beaten by some Catholics. Two Protestant pastors were taken hostage before state officials intervened. The negotiated agreement stipulated that these Catholics would not continue to mistreat the Protestants or force them to pay fines to be released; in return the Protestants would

not press charges! But the reverse can also happen. In a primarily Protestant village in Chiapas, a Catholic parish priest was attacked and 13 Catholic families fled after the local village council sanctioned local Catholics for failing to obtain permission to remodel their church. The new construction was destroyed and land confiscated.

These cases demonstrate an increase in the practice of "majority enforcement of religion" that undermines advancing international religious freedom for all. It is hard for state and federal governments to monitor abuses taking place in rural areas. Even if government officials are aware, they are sometimes reluctant to intercede, given limited resources and in deference to local customs. This leads to a culture of impunity.

To further compound the religious freedom situation in Mexico, some illegal cartels are targeting churches and religious leaders for two reasons: to force these religious institutions to be a front for money laundering, and to challenge the programs and teachings of the Church that offer alternatives to a life of violence.

In fighting a culture of impunity, the Bishops of Mexico issued a powerful statement in February 2015 that called for all elements of government and civil society to combat corruption in all its forms. The Bishops of Mexico also expressed their solidarity with Bishop Miguel Patiño Velázquez, who in his January 2014 Pastoral Letter noted that "people expect a more effective state action against those who are causing this chaos."

The Mexican Bishops' Conference has urged authorities to solve in a comprehensive and inclusive manner the violence afflicting so many individuals and families, so that citizens can live in peace, as is their right. In an August 2005 statement, the Bishops of Mexico affirmed their support for international religious freedom, stating they "want a truly democratic country with a secular and pluralistic state that does not promote any religion nor any antireligious current" and called for the state to respect churches, religious associations and their members.



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