



Sign found at site of church attack in Bio Bío. Photo: https://4.bp.blogspot.com/-c1D32ATePKE/Vwzk_Jg9FaI/AAAAAAAAI0U/qRaEKWux7ckX7Z9txNr82jhPZXz8OXHeQCLcB/s1600/IMG-20160412-WA0000.jpg

CHILE

RECENT CHURCH ATTACKS

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BACKGROUND

Since democracy was restored to Chile in 1990, human rights including freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) have been generally respected. The 2012 census found that 66% of the population identified as Catholic and 17% as Protestant. The constitution contains protection for FoRB, and a 1999 law prohibits discrimination based on religion. In recent years the government has actively engaged with religious minorities and worked to improve understanding of and strengthen protections for FoRB.

This year, however, has seen a series of unsolved, organised arson attacks on churches, both Protestant and Catholic, in one region of the country. This should not be seen as indicative of a more general, country-wide deterioration in FoRB; however, there is no question that the arson attacks have provoked alarm and are very much a threat to FoRB in the region.

ARSON ATTACKS

The spate of attacks on churches began on 31 December 2015, and has been restricted almost entirely to one region, La Araucanía.¹ There has been one case in neighbouring Bio Bío. La Araucanía has a history of instability: pro-autonomy or separatist movements affiliated with Mapuche indigenous groups have been active there since the region was taken over by Chile in 1885. These movements were renewed after the restoration of democracy in 1990; however, until this year the movements did not specifically target churches in any organised way.²

Since the end of 2015 at least 16 churches or church institutions (such as a seminary) have been burnt down in La Araucanía. Both Protestant and Catholic churches are being targeted: each denomination respectively has had seven and nine churches or properties attacked. In each case accelerants were used, indicating deliberate acts of arson, and pamphlets or signs were found at the site which made reference to the Mapuche separatist cause. The majority of these specifically called for freedom for 'Mapuche political prisoners', in some cases including a list of names.

The materials left behind clearly indicate that churches are a specific target. After two churches, one Catholic and one Protestant, were both burnt down on 31 March, leaflets found at the site included a threat to burn 'all the churches'. In the Bio Bío attack on 12 April, a sign was left accusing a Catholic bishop of being 'complicit in state repression', and claiming the attacks on churches were his responsibility. The sign read 'Obispo Stegmaier Cómplice de la Represión del Estado, Responsable de la Violencia Hacia la Iglesia. Libertad a los Presos P. Mapuche'.

1 There have been arson attacks on Catholic churches in the capital city of Santiago this year, but there is no clear link to the arson attacks in La Araucanía and Bio Bío.

2 There have been a handful of arson attacks on churches in the region over the past decade, but they do not seem to be related to the 2016 arson attacks, which have been accompanied by consistent and specific political demands.

Two of the most recent attacks, on 9 June on a Protestant church and on 16 June on a Catholic church, have incorporated a level of violence that was not present in earlier attacks. Previously the attacks had taken place late at night or in the early hours of the morning, when the targeted locations were empty (in one case, a caretaker who was sleeping on the site was warned and given time to leave). The 9 June attack, however, took place during an evening church service.³ Masked and armed assailants entered the church and fired shots, warning all those present to leave, before burning down the church. In the 16 June incident the assailants attacked a truck carrying firefighters and a police escort to the scene, and one police officer was shot in the face.

These developments represent a worrying escalation in these attacks, with an increased likelihood of violence against civilians or members of public institutions such as firefighters or police officers.

OFFICIAL INVESTIGATIONS

Initially the government was reluctant to recognise that churches were being targeted specifically, stating on various occasions that arson was a common tactic used by separatists, and “Many things get burned down.” In spring 2016, however, high ranking government officials publicly recognised that the attacks constitute an attack on FoRB. The government has launched investigations, but despite some arrests related to the 9 June attack, the arson attacks have continued.

While some of the leaflets and signs left at the sites of the attacks have included names of organisations, they are not groups that are widely known; there are also doubts that the attackers are really affiliated with the named group. As a result there is still confusion as to who is responsible. All the materials left at the attack sites have referred exclusively to political aims, specifically freedom for ‘Mapuche political prisoners’; there has been no indication that there is any religious motivation, for example an attempt to promote traditional beliefs, behind the attacks. There is speculation that those responsible are a small group supported by non-indigenous, outside

organisations associated with extreme anti-Western⁴ movements in other parts of Chile, or that elements from anti-Western groups have infiltrated the Mapuche separatist movement and are now pushing their own agenda.

Though the attacks may be linked to anti-western, anti-government and pro-Mapuche-separatist sentiment, CSW contacts in Chile do not believe that the church burnings are part of the larger movement for Mapuche autonomy. They point to the fact that the Mapuche population is highly religious (about 55% Catholic and 32-37% Protestant), and it therefore seems unlikely that the more well-known, established pro-autonomy groups would suddenly single out churches for attack.

CSW contacts have expressed concern that both sides of the political spectrum in Chile have distorted the facts to match their own agenda, with left-wing groups downplaying the attacks and claiming that they are the acts of ‘pyromaniacs’, while right-wing groups are trying to use the attacks to paint the entire Mapuche pro-autonomy movement as terrorist in nature.

CONCLUSION

The continued arson attacks have sown fear within the churchgoing population in La Araucanía and Bio Bío. While it is still unclear who exactly is behind the targeting of churches, or why they are linking the liberation of ‘political prisoners’ to the destruction of churches, there is no question that their actions constitute an attack on FoRB in the region. Many of the targeted churches have members from very low income backgrounds; this, together with the complete destruction of the churches and their contents in almost all cases, will make it very difficult for them to rebuild their places of worship. Fifteen congregations have now been left without a place of worship. More will likely be left in the same situation, with no indication, at the time of writing, of an end to the arson attacks.

³ The attack on the church during a worship service may have been a tactical mistake on the part of the assailants, as witnesses were able to identify some of those responsible and arrests were later carried out. Unfortunately, the arrests did not result in the end of the attacks on churches, with another taking place one week later.

⁴ Over the last decade, anti-Western and anti-capitalist groups have become more active in the major cities. Some of these groups maintain a discourse that is hostile to religion in general and Christianity in particular. Some follow a classic Marxist-Leninist approach to religion, while others have a more anarchist leaning and view the Church as part of the establishment to be attacked.