

Introduction

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 engaged with religious minorities and worked to improve understanding of and strengthen protections for FoRB.

Church attacks

However, in recent years, there have been a series of unsolved, organised arson attacks on churches, both Protestant and Catholic, principally 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.

The spate of attacks on churches began on 31 December 2015 and has been restricted almost entirely to one region, La Araucanía.¹ Since the end of 2015, at least 35 churches or church institutions (such as seminaries) have been completely or partially burnt down in La Araucanía and Bío Bío. Both Protestant and Catholic churches are being targeted. In each case, accelerants were used, indicating deliberate acts of arson, and pamphlets, signs or handwritten notes were found at the site which made reference to the Mapuche separatist cause. The materials left behind clearly indicate that churches are a specific target.

- After two churches, one Catholic and one Protestant, were burnt down on 31 March 2016, leaflets found at the site included a threat to burn “all the churches”.
- In the Bío Bío attack on 12 April 2016, a sign was left accusing a Catholic bishop of being “complicit in state repression” and claiming the attacks on churches were his responsibility.²
- On 27 July 2017, Molotov cocktails were thrown at a church in Maquehue, Araucanía, but the fire was put out before it caused serious damage. A canvas was found outside which said there would be ‘no peace while land is usurped and Mapuches are imprisoned’.
- On 20 September 2017, three churches were attacked on the same evening. Handwritten notes were left outside all three, referencing the Mapuche Resistance and ‘freedom for political prisoners’.

- After attempts were made to attack a Protestant church on 9 July 2018, it was successfully burnt down on 3 August 2018. Pamphlets were found referencing two people serving sentences for attacks on churches: “If there is no justice for the people, may there be no peace for the government. Freedom for the Trangol Galindo brothers”.

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 2016 attack, the arson attacks have continued.

All the materials left at the attack sites have referred exclusively to political aims, specifically freedom for ‘Mapuche political prisoners’, and there have been few indications 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-Western³ 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.

3 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.

1 There have been arson attacks and bombs targeting Catholic churches in the capital city of Santiago in 2016 and in January 2018, but there is no clear link to the series of arson attacks in La Araucanía and Bío Bío.

2 The sign in Spanish: ‘Obispo Stegmaier Cómplice de la Represión del Estado, Responsable de la Violencia Hacia la Iglesia. Libertad a los Presos P. Mapuche.’

Conclusion

The continued arson attacks have sown fear within the churchgoing population in La Araucanía and Bío 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. Dozens of 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.

Recommendations

- Encourage the Chilean government to continue engaging with religious minorities to improve the protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief.
- Urge the Chilean government to ensure that all churches that receive threats of attack are properly protected by security forces.
- Call on the government of Chile to continue and enhance its investigation into this issue, and to ensure that where possible, perpetrators are arrested and brought to justice.