

Mexico: Freedom of religion or belief

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Introduction

While there are strong protections for freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the Mexican constitution, moderate to severe FoRB violations are regular occurrences in many parts of the country. The majority of these violations are the result of local authorities attempting to enforce religious conformity at the village or town level.

While it is the state government's responsibility to address these cases, they rarely take action to intervene; similarly, the federal government does virtually nothing to ensure that the constitutional rights of the victims are upheld. This has allowed a culture of impunity to develop in at least 14 states, and especially in Chiapas, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Oaxaca and Puebla. In these states the majority religious group often believes it is their right to enforce religious belief and practice at the local level.

Deprivation of access to basic services

One of the most frequent methods of pressuring members of minority faiths to join or participate in the activities of the majority religious group is by depriving them of access to basic services such as water and electricity. In the state of Oaxaca for example, Protestants in the municipality of San Juan Ozolotepec reported that their water supply was cut off in March 2017. Similar cases have been reported in the past, particularly in Chiapas, and were not resolved until members of the minority religious group paid fines.

Access to education and medical care

Children belonging to minority religious groups are frequently barred from attending school by local leaders in an effort to pressure their parents to join the majority faith. A number of such cases have been documented in the states of Oaxaca, Hidalgo and Chiapas. The Oaxaca State Ombudsman has spoken out on multiple occasions to denounce this practice, but the state government has taken little action to protect the right of minority faith children to an education.

Children who have been forcibly displaced along with their families because of their religious beliefs are also frequently deprived of their right to an education. Because of the circumstances of their displacement, which often involves violence, many lack the paperwork necessary to enrol in a school in their new place of residence.

Forced displacement

The forced displacement of religious minorities is a common occurrence in states where the Law of Uses and Customs is prevalent. On 4 December 2017, 42 Jehovah's Witnesses and 22 Protestants (15 of whom were children) were forcibly displaced from Tuxpan de Bolaños in Jalisco State. These

groups were violently expelled from their town, driven into the mountains and abandoned. Local authorities also destroyed most of their homes, making it unlikely they would be able to return. This was the second mass displacement of religious minorities in Tuxpan de Bolaños in as many years. Government officials took no action to address the first forced displacement in January 2016, and despite warnings, did nothing to prevent the second.

Other violations

A number of other FoRB violations have also been documented in recent years. These include:

- Attempted forced conversion
- Arbitrary detention
- Theft and destruction of property
- Confiscation of land.

The impact of organised crime

The expansion of violent criminal groups in the country has led to an increase in FoRB violations. Many of these groups view church leaders, both Catholic and Protestant, and their influence, as a threat to their power; for example if church leaders speak out about trafficking and other illegal activity, or discourage young people from joining a criminal group.

Criminal groups often target churches for extortion, attempting to coerce church leaders into paying protection money or allowing their churches to be used for money laundering. In March 2017 the Roman Catholic Multimedia Centre (CCM) reported that 520 priests were currently being extorted. Priests have also been threatened, kidnapped and tortured. The situation of the Protestant community is believed to be similar, although, for a number of reasons, there has not been consistent documentation of attacks on Protestant church leaders.

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Recommendations

- Ensure that the state and federal governments take action on all illegal actions by local authorities that are linked to FoRB violations, to ensure that everyone has their constitutional right to FoRB upheld, and that a culture of impunity does not continue. This includes intervening in cases where religious minorities:
 - Have their access to basic services, including electricity, water, education and health care, cut off or restricted.
 - Are forcibly displaced
 - Are pressured to convert to another religion
 - Are arbitrarily detained
 - Suffer theft and destruction of property
 - Have their land confiscated.
- Call on the Mexican government to launch full and thorough investigations into every case involving extortion, assault or murder of religious leaders, ensuring that perpetrators are brought to justice.

As Christians, we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.