

Over the past 60 years Colombia has experienced a complex internal conflict involving multiple illegal armed and criminal groups and government forces. Violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the country take two main forms: violations perpetrated by illegal armed and criminal groups, often specifically targeting religious leadership; and violations against religious minorities belonging to indigenous groups. Religious minorities in indigenous groups sometimes experience both types of violations.

Over the past 18 months conflict-related violence in Colombia has reached levels last seen decades ago. A 2016 peace agreement between the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), previously the largest guerrilla group in the country, was characterised by slow and inconsistent implementation and splits within the FARC as dissident factions broke away to continue fighting. A vow to pursue 'total peace' by outgoing president Gustavo Petro, through dialogues with any illegal armed or criminal group interested in engaging, so far remains unfulfilled, with the termination of talks with the National Liberation Army (ELN), now the largest guerrilla group in the country, and the group's major military offensive along the border with Venezuela resulting in the mass displacement of tens of thousands of people in early 2025.

Colombia's 2026 presidential elections were marked by the highest levels of electoral violence since the early 2000s, with reports of coercion and intimidation by illegal armed groups. In June a pastor from Arauca informed CSW that religious leaders in rural areas had received warnings from the ELN aimed at preventing them from supporting the right-wing candidate Abelardo de la Espriella. Elsewhere, in Caquetá and Cauca, FARC dissident factions instructed religious leaders to warn their congregations that their votes would be monitored, with some groups reportedly threatening to require voters to photograph their marked ballot papers and show the images to their representatives, allowing them to identify those who did not follow their orders. In August de la Espriella was inaugurated as president after winning a run-off election on 21 June.

### Legal framework

Colombia's constitution contains strong protections for FoRB generally. The right to conscientious objection, including due to religious beliefs, was reaffirmed in a 2014 ruling by the Constitutional Court after years of routine violations of this right by the military. FoRB violations in indigenous communities are largely rooted in a 1998 Constitutional Court ruling that, in a split judgement, upheld the right of traditional authorities to enforce the observation of and participation in traditional religious beliefs and practices on indigenous reserves. The same court and lower courts have referred to the 1998 decision in subsequent FoRB cases, reaffirming the right of indigenous authorities to prohibit the practice of 'non-traditional' religions on indigenous reserves.

### FoRB violations

Human rights violations, including violations of FoRB, are committed by all actors in the conflict. The ELN and FARC breakaway groups remain the two most significant historically leftist guerrilla groups, but numerous new armed organised criminal groups have emerged across the country, complicating the situation, especially for civilians living in regions characterised by a significant presence of one or more illegal armed or criminal group. These groups often impose severe restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly and movement – all of which impact FoRB – in areas under their control or influence. Over the course of the conflict thousands of religious leaders who have defied these restrictions and continued to carry out their work, either openly or clandestinely, have been forcibly displaced or targeted for assassination.

Illegal armed and criminal groups often perceive the presence of a strong or growing church as a threat to their authority in areas under their control or influence. The content of religious leaders' sermons and community outreach and their movements are often closely monitored. Religious groups are regularly subjected to extortion in areas under the control or influence of illegal armed and criminal groups. In some cases, such groups demand active cooperation, for example, pressuring religious leaders to use their churches to launder money or to hide contraband such as weapons and narcotics. Recruitment of youth has been a particular flashpoint as illegal armed and criminal groups aggressively pursue young people and children to replenish their ranks. Religious leaders who counsel against joining or participating in the activities of an illegal armed or criminal group are at risk of being designated the enemy of the respective group.

The cost of refusing to meet the demands of illegal armed and criminal groups is high. At least 11 religious leaders have been assassinated, extrajudicially executed, forcibly disappeared or kidnapped in Colombia since December 2024, including most recently Protestant Pastor José Otoniel Ortega, who was shot dead by armed individuals on 31 December 2025 whilst celebrating New Year's Eve with his family in the Santa Elena neighbourhood of Fundación Municipality, Magdalena Department. In July 2025 the bodies of seven Protestant church leaders and an eighth social leader to whom two of them were related were discovered in a mass grave in Guaviare Department – three months after they had disappeared upon complying with summonses from a dissident FARC faction.

In 2023 the Colombian government removed religious leaders from an official list of categories of particularly vulnerable populations. In practice, this means that even in cases where religious leaders have received credible and serious threats, they are no longer able to access official security mechanisms and protection programmes designated for those considered to be vulnerable.

## Indigenous communities

Indigenous communities experience both conflict-related FoRB violations and FoRB violations committed by traditional authorities seeking to impose religious uniformity in their communities. In some communities the traditional authorities, generally known as ‘cabildos’, have interpreted the 1998 Constitutional Court ruling to mean that they have the authority to define what traditional beliefs are, and to punish those who decline to profess or participate in their version of the traditional beliefs. This and subsequent rulings upholding the 1998 decision have created an exception in Colombian law on FoRB. Indigenous Colombians do not enjoy the same rights as the rest of the population in contravention of Colombia’s international human rights obligations, leaving religious minorities in indigenous areas without protection for their right to FoRB, or legal recourse at the national level.

Members of these communities who have converted to other religions or beliefs, and away from the religious beliefs and practices promoted by their leaders, may be arbitrarily detained, physically punished, excluded from certain benefits, or forcibly displaced. They can also be blocked from accessing programmes for members of indigenous communities. In October 2025 a traditional indigenous council on Nasa land in Cauca Department convened a discussion on the presence of Protestant Pastor Aristides Chocue in the community of Betania, Caldonio Municipality, which concluded that he and his family must leave their village within a matter of weeks or face punishment. The pastor has since been forced into hiding.

In May 2026 traditional authorities in the region known as the Black Line raised concerns about their exclusion from consultation processes related to a new decree that redefines and legally reinforces the protection of the ancestral territory. The decree places many of the region’s sacred sites under the representational and decision-making frameworks of organisations based primarily in the departments of Cesar and La Guajira and affiliated with the Territorial Council of Cabildos (CTC), excluding sectors of the Kogui and Wiwa peoples in particular.

## Recommendations

### *To the government of Colombia:*

- Restore religious leaders as a category of ‘vulnerable people’ and ensure their access to government protection programmes and security mechanisms as and when necessary.
- Address restrictions on FoRB and related human rights imposed by all actors in the ongoing domestic conflict and implement security measures for communities in areas where illegal armed groups are active.
- Ensure that the Office of the Attorney-General prioritises its investigations of killings of human rights defenders, including religious leaders, and provide access to protection mechanisms for those defending FoRB and

other human rights, including civil society leaders and representatives of the government at the national, state, and local levels who report and engage on attacks on or threats against religious leaders.

- Continue to pursue initiatives that will establish a lasting and just peace, ensuring that dialogues with any actor in the conflict include protections for FoRB and related rights, including freedom of conscience.
- Enact and fully implement consistent legislation that will protect FoRB for all Colombians, including those living on indigenous lands.

### *To the government of the United States:*

- The State Department should consider designating the National Liberation Army (ELN) as an Entity of Particular Concern due to severe FoRB violations in areas under its influence or control both in Colombia and Venezuela.
- The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, once nominated and confirmed, and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should request invitations to visit Colombia with unhindered access to all parts of the country and the ability to meet freely with diverse representatives of religious and indigenous groups.
- The US government should seek ways and engage with international counterparts to support initiatives to build peace and strengthen democracy and rule of law with respect for human rights, including FoRB for all.
- The US Embassy in Bogota should ensure that its interactions with the religious sector are regular and representative, actively seeking to engage with religious groups with a presence in areas with a significant presence of illegal armed or criminal groups and in indigenous communities. Annual monitoring and reporting on FoRB should include the role non-state entities play in the systematic, egregious and ongoing violations of FoRB, especially in areas where illegal armed or criminal groups are active.
- Urge the government of Colombia, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above ‘To the government of Colombia’.

### *To the United Nations and Member States:*

- Urge Colombia to guarantee the right to FoRB for all in law and in practice, including for those living on indigenous lands, in line with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which the state is party, and to champion the right to FoRB as a member of the Human Rights Council.
- Urge the OHCHR and all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to FoRB in their reporting on Colombia, addressing the vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief communities, including those living on indigenous lands, and those seeking to defend them.

- Encourage UN Special Procedures to request country visits to Colombia and ensure that members of civil society can freely meet with them without reprisal.
- Support Colombia by ensuring peace agreements and dialogues, with all actors to the conflict, include the promotion and protection of FoRB.
- Continue to support the OHCHR and independent expert on Colombia in their work, including through the provision of technical assistance and capacity-building to national and local authorities and other relevant actors in the implementation of the recommendations made by the Commission for the Clarification of Truth, Coexistence and Non-Repetition, with particular attention to victims.
- Utilise the Universal Periodic Review process, Human Rights Council sessions and other key international human rights instruments to raise FoRB violations in Colombia and to offer recommendations to advance the right to FoRB.
- Urge the government of Colombia, at every appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Colombia'.

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