

Legal framework

Chile has ratified 22 international treaties that recognise the right to FoRB, however none of these have been incorporated into national law. The constitution contains protections for freedom of conscience and worship, and a 1999 law prohibits discrimination based on religion. There is [official separation](#) between religion and state.

Since democracy was restored to Chile in 1990, human rights, including freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), have generally been respected. The 2019 census found that 45% of the population identified as Roman Catholic, 18% as Protestant, 4% other religions, and 36% no religion. In recent years the government has actively engaged with religious minorities and worked to improve understanding of and strengthen protections for FoRB.

Indigenous law

Indigenous law provides protections for the indigenous culture and customs of nine indigenous groups in Chile. Article 2 and Article 9 of the 1993 Indigenous Law contain the criteria necessary for one to receive recognition as a member of one of the nine indigenous groups in Chile.

The Mapuche are an indigenous people who live in parts of Chile and Argentina. The criteria laid out in the Indigenous Law allow for those who are ethnically Mapuche, but no longer practise the traditional customs or religion, to be able to receive certain benefits.

However, the National Corporation for Indigenous Development (CONADI), an entity set up to protect and promote indigenous communities through government policy, has reportedly excluded Mapuche Protestant Christians from access to indigenous grants for higher education because they were found to have failed to participate in Mapuche customs. The CONADI has not made publicly available the criteria it uses to establish whether an individual participates in the customs of the ethnic group.

Attacks on churches

Between December 2015 and October 2021, over 40 organised arson attacks were recorded against a variety of religious buildings predominantly in the regions of Araucanía and Biobío, which have a long history of activity by militant indigenous separatist movements. A few attacks have also been reported in Los Lagos Region. There are some discrepancies regarding the exact number of arson attacks as local press coverage is not consistent.

Both Protestant and Roman Catholic churches have been targeted. In many cases, accelerants have been used, indicating deliberate acts of arson, and pamphlets, signs or handwritten notes were found at the sites which made reference to the Mapuche separatist cause. The materials left behind clearly indicate that churches are a specific target. In one attack in the region of Biobío on 12 April 2016, a sign was left accusing a Roman Catholic bishop of being “complicit in state repression” and claiming the attacks on churches were his responsibility. The sign in Spanish read:

“Obispo Stegmaier Cómplice de la Represión del Estado, Responsable de la Violencia Hacia la Iglesia. Libertad a los Presos P. Mapuche.”

In three other incidents on 20 September 2017, two Protestant churches in Collipulli, Araucanía, and one Roman Catholic church in Malleco, Araucanía, were attacked on the same evening. Handwritten notes were left outside all three, referencing the Mapuche Resistance and ‘freedom for political prisoners.’

On 12 October 2021, two churches in Biobío were completely destroyed. Pastor Pedro Liguénpi of the “Nuevo Pacto Pentecostal Cristiano” (New Covenant Pentecostal Christian) Church, based in the Bajo Quilantahue sector of Tirúa Commune, Arauco Province, told local media that his church was attacked at approximately 2.20am, and that it was demolished by the flames. A Roman Catholic church in the Primer Agua sector of Tirúa Commune, Arauco Province was attacked at 3.10am and was also destroyed.

The Archbishop of Concepción issued a statement condemning the attacks on both churches: “We condemn these acts and regret the damage done to those who profess the faith, this in turn, wounds a fundamental aspect of the human being, freedom of religion.”

It is important to note that the victims of these attacks, those whose churches have been destroyed, are mostly Mapuche themselves.

Initially, the government was reluctant to recognise that churches were being targeted, stating that arson was a common tactic used by separatists and churches were just one of many such targets. In spring 2016, however, high-ranking government officials publicly recognised that the attacks constitute an attack on FoRB. In November 2018 the government announced plans to assist in the reconstruction of 30 Roman Catholic churches and 12 Protestant churches. In June 2019 the Provincial Governor of the Araucanía Region confirmed 1.4 billion Chilean pesos (approximately £1.3 million GBP/\$1.7 million USD) had been designated for general reconstruction efforts, however it appears that the process of implementation has been slow.

In some cases these delays have led local Christians to rebuild their places of worship with their own resources. The National Office of Religious Affairs (ONAR), an executive government agency that facilitates communication between faith communities and the government and is tasked with protecting the rights of religious minorities, has [continued](#) to work with local authorities in affected communities to rebuild the damaged churches.

Other church attacks

In recent years, churches, mostly Roman Catholic, have also been targeted in the capital city of Santiago, in attacks that do not appear to be directly related to the arson attacks in Araucanía and Biobío. On 18 October 2020, two Roman Catholic churches were burnt down amid demonstrations in Santiago marking the anniversary of the October 2019 protests.

An outbreak of protests in Santiago de Chile in October 2019, initially over a rise in metro fares, led to a series of lootings and attacks on churches and other buildings amidst widespread violence. While some churches seem to have been affected inadvertently because they happened to be located in a commercial building that was targeted by vandals, some churches appear to have been deliberately singled out. The majority of such attacks were against Roman Catholic churches, the most prominent being the arson attack against Iglesia de la Veracruz, listed as an historic monument in 1983, and the attack on Parroquia de La Asunción Roman Catholic Church, which had property burned and was vandalised with slogans such as “The only church that enlightens is the one that burns.”

In January 2018 there were nine arson attacks on Roman Catholic churches in Santiago and the regions of Araucanía and Los Ríos. These have not been linked with the aforementioned attacks on other churches in indigenous areas, as pamphlets left at some of the sites indicated that these attacks were specifically linked to Pope Francis’ visit to Chile from 15 to 18 January 2018. Fire accelerants were used in the majority of these cases. The churches targeted in Araucanía and Los Ríos were completely destroyed as a result of the flames.

Recommendations

To the government of Chile:

- Continue engaging with religious minorities to improve protections for right to freedom of religion or belief.
- Ensure that no Mapuche are the victims of discrimination because of their religious beliefs or lack of belief by CONADI or other such bodies.
- Ensure that all religious institutions including churches that receive threats of attack are properly protected by security forces.
- Continue and enhance investigations into the attacks on churches and other religious buildings, and ensure that perpetrators are prosecuted.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Raise issues of freedom of religion or belief during bilateral and multilateral dialogues with the Chilean government.
- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to freedom of religion or belief in their reporting on Chile, addressing the vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief communities and those seeking to defend them.
- Call on Chile to conduct impartial, timely investigations into church attacks and other allegations of violations

against religious or belief minorities, ensuring that perpetrators are held to account.

To the government of the United States of America:

- The State Department should continue to closely monitor FoRB in Chile.
- The Ambassador for International Religious Freedom and the US Commission for International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) should request an invitation to visit Chile with unhindered access to all parts of the country.

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