

Legal framework

Mexico's constitution protects freedom of religion or belief (FoRB). Article 1 affirms that the rights protected under the constitution and those in international treaties to which Mexico is party are protected equally. Article 2 focuses on indigenous peoples and details their unique legal status, including their right to 'decide their internal forms of coexistence' and to 'apply their own legal system to regulate and solve their internal conflicts', with the condition that this practice does not violate the constitution and must respect 'fundamental rights, human rights, and, above all, the dignity and safety of women.' Article 24 protects FoRB but prohibits the use of religious expression for 'political ends', campaigning or political propaganda and restricts 'ordinary religious acts' to 'temples'.¹

Mexico is a member of the Organization of American States and has ratified a number of international treaties which include provisions for FoRB, including the American Convention on Human Rights, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights (ICESCR).

'Uses and Customs' is an umbrella term referring to the right of indigenous communities to govern themselves according to their traditions. Although this is meant to be exercised in accordance with fundamental human rights as defined in the constitution and international law, in practice the government at the municipal, state and federal levels does little to ensure this. In many communities governed under Uses and Customs, leaders associated with the majority religious group believe it is their right to enforce religious belief and practice, including forced financial contributions to and mandatory participation in religious events.

Reports of serious FoRB violations affecting religious minorities at the local level, and in several states, have continued despite a 2020 ruling by Mexico's National Supreme Court of Justice in favour of indigenous communities whose rights have been violated by village authorities through an abuse of Uses and Customs.² A culture of impunity when it comes to FoRB violations is entrenched in around 14 states, and especially in Chiapas, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Jalisco, Oaxaca and Puebla. The government, at the federal, state and municipal level, has made little effort to improve understanding of FoRB among those in positions of authority.

The loss of civil rights and political rights

The refusal of members of religious minority communities to participate in religious activities associated with the religious

majority can lead to the removal of civil and political rights, as members of the religious minority are stripped of their status as members of the community. In practice, this means that they can be blocked from the ability to obtain official identification documents, including birth certificates, they can be blocked from accessing social programs, and, more widely, their status as an indigenous person is unrecognised. This status provides access to government benefits including community education, medical attention, discounts on water and electricity bills, and other social programs only available to indigenous communities. In one example of the impact of such measures, in 2018 religious minority women in the communities of Rancho Nuevo and Coamila, Huejutla de Reyes Municipality, Hidalgo were barred from accessing a government programme aimed at supporting single mothers with school age children after community leaders removed their status as members of the community.³

In Contepec, Huejutla de Reyes Municipality, Hidalgo, local authorities who belong to the religious majority have ordered that all members of the community, regardless of their religion, are obliged to contribute to Roman Catholic festivities and other activities. Three Protestant families in the villages refused to do so, and were removed from the official list of recognised members of the community, after having been summoned repeatedly before the village assembly since February 2025. As a consequence, they are blocked from accessing government programmes⁴ and are stripped of all rights associated with being a member of the community.

Denial of basic services

In communities governed under Uses and Customs, members of religious minorities are frequently disconnected from or blocked from accessing basic services such as water and electricity as a tactic to pressure them to convert to or participate in activities linked to the majority religion. Although this is illegal, such cases are generally only resolved when members of the religious minority pay illegal fines or sign formal 'agreements' committing themselves to actively participate in and contribute financially to activities associated with the religious majority. Cases involving the blocking of access to water and electricity can go on for years without effective government intervention.

For example, four families, all Chol speaking members of a Presbyterian religious minority in Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, Palenque Municipality, Chiapas, have been without access to water since 15 January 2012. In 2014 the village authorities also cut off their electricity and restricted their access to their land used for farming. The community assembly subsequently decided to confiscate the families' land and to forcibly displace them from the community. An agrarian

1 Temples refers to buildings legally recognised for religious use.

2 CSW, 'Mexico: Supreme Court rules in favour of displaced indigenous minorities', 14 July 2020 <https://www.csw.org.uk/2020/07/14/press/4734/article.htm>

3 The programme, now called 'del Bienestar', was then known as 'Prospera'.

4 The government provides multiple social programmes to people living in indigenous communities, provided they reside in and are recognised as belonging to the communities. These programmes include scholarships for farmers, empowerment for indigenous women, food assistance, support for the elderly, community development initiatives, and community entrepreneurship programmes.

court overturned this decision in 2017 but the ruling was not enforced and the four families remain without access to water, electricity, or the agricultural land upon which their livelihoods depend.

Arbitrary detention

Local authorities frequently use arbitrary detention as a tactic to intimidate and pressure members of religious minorities to renounce their beliefs and/or participate in religious activities. In July 2024 community leaders in Montenegro, San Juan Bautista Valle Nacional Municipality, Oaxaca, arbitrarily detained a married couple, Tito Mariano Méndez and Esther Abigail Pérez Ramírez, in an attempt to pressure them to withdraw a complaint made to the Oaxaca State Ombudsman's Office regarding their experiences of FoRB violations. The couple's complaint referred to incidents they have experienced due to the fact that they are Protestant Christians. In 2020 their house was destroyed in an arson attack following threats from community leaders due to their religious beliefs. In 2023 they pulled their children out of the local school due to severe mistreatment and discrimination because of their faith. Mr Mariano Méndez then filed a complaint with the ombudsman's office in Tuxtepec, Oaxaca, which, in turn, requested a report from Montenegro community leaders regarding the family's situation that precipitated their detention. While they were freed a few days later after the state government travelled to the area to negotiate their release, no-one responsible for their illegal detention or the other human rights violations has been held to account.

Forced displacement

Studies have consistently noted that a common driver of internal displacement in Mexico is religious intolerance and conflicts over religious practices.⁵ Forced displacement almost always takes place after a series of escalating FoRB and human rights violations have already occurred and the government has failed to intervene.

In April 2024 authorities of the aforementioned villages of Rancho Nuevo and Coamila in Hidalgo forcibly displaced 170 members of a Protestant Baptist religious minority. Human rights violations linked to FoRB had been ongoing and severe in the two neighbouring villages since 2015. Local authorities have repeatedly attempted to force members of the religious minority to participate in Roman Catholic religious festivals, including through financial donations, lighting candles and actively participating in acts of worship. Despite detailed documentation of the case dating back to 2015, the municipal government continues to deny that the incidents in Rancho Nuevo and Coamila are linked to FoRB.

In September 2024 an agreement was brokered by the municipal government allowing for the return of the displaced families with guarantees for FoRB in return for

dropping a case filed against the local authorities with the state prosecutor's office. The agreement was not honoured by local authorities in the two villages, however, and with no effective remedy to allow them to return home with guarantees for their safety, the displaced families relocated to the neighbouring state of Veracruz where they established the new community of 'La Paz'.⁶

In a more recent case, in January 2026 Protestant Christian Mariano Velásquez Martínez was forcibly displaced from his community of Santiago Malacatepec, San Juan Mazatlán Mixe Municipality, Oaxaca, along with his wife and infant daughter. Pastor Velásquez Martínez, who belongs to the Mixe ethnolinguistic group, had been assigned a leadership role in a Roman Catholic festival celebrated in the community and had agreed only on the condition that he not be made to participate in religious acts. Despite financial hardship, he also agreed to contribute financially. At the time of the celebration, however, he was ordered to perform Roman Catholic religious rituals, including kneeling before and praying to a religious image. When he refused, he was arbitrarily detained and held for 48 hours. Following his release, he was brought before the community general assembly, which ordered his expulsion.

The right to an education

Religious minority children in communities governed under Uses and Customs are sometimes barred from attending school by local leaders in an attempt to pressure their parents to join the majority religion. In one such case, the children and nephew of Darío Manzano Márquez have been denied access to primary and preschool education in San Luis Morelia, Santiago Tamazola Municipality, Oaxaca, since September 2025 after Mr Manzano Márquez, a Protestant Christian, refused to contribute financially to and participate in a traditional dance held annually in observance of the Roman Catholic patron saint. He was arbitrarily detained for 36 hours at the time and the punishment for his attempt to exercise his right to FoRB has been expanded to the children in his extended family and is ongoing.

Similarly, Tzotzil children affiliated with the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in the community of Pinal Salinas and Tzajalnabin, Zinacantán Municipality, Chiapas, are barred from attending the local primary school. This forms part of a larger pattern of discrimination that has been ongoing for over four years. The religious minority families have seen their water and electricity cut off and access to their homes obstructed. In January 2026, 11 members of the religious minority were assaulted and arbitrarily detained by local leaders after they refused to accept assigned roles and to contribute financially to traditional Roman Catholic festivities.

Even when members of religious minorities have been able to set up alternative educational opportunities for their

⁵ The Mexican Commission for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights, AC (CMDPDH), 'Forced Displacement in Mexico', 15 December 2022 (Spanish) <https://cmdpdh.org/2022/12/15/desplazamiento-interno-forzado-en-mexico/>

⁶ A full history of the case is detailed in CSW's latest report on Mexico, available at: <https://www.csw.org.uk/mexicoreport>

children, local authorities have sought to stop them. From 2021 to 2024 municipal leaders in Mixquitic Municipality, Jalisco, barred teachers from employment at the school in La Codorníz, a Protestant majority community within the municipality. Teachers were freely permitted to work in Roman Catholic majority villages. In 2024 this discriminatory treatment came to an end, following CSW advocacy and the subsequent intervention of the Jalisco State Religious Affairs Office.

Children who have been forcibly displaced along with their families because of their religion or beliefs are also often subsequently deprived of their right to an education. Due to the circumstances of their forced displacement, often involving destruction of property and violence, many are unable to obtain the paperwork necessary to enrol in a school in their new place of residence. School and government officials rarely make the process easy for the parents and sometimes turn the children away.

The impact of organised crime

Restrictions on free movement due to the control of organised crime groups in various regions of Mexico have created a barrier to FoRB. These groups establish curfews and define perimeters and zones of permitted movement in the regions where they operate in order to protect themselves from rival groups or federal law enforcement agencies. These restrictions can negatively affect basic rights, including freedom of assembly and freedom of expression, intersecting with FoRB. In practice, they can prohibit members of religious groups from meeting for worship and other religious activities. Those who fail to obey these restrictions and religious leaders who publicly condemn violence and illegal activities are often threatened, subjected to violence, and in many cases, forcibly displaced. An example of this is found in the lower mountain region municipality of Chilapa in Guerrero, where religious communities are under threat from organised criminal groups and came under direct attack in May and June 2026 because of their refusal to submit to the rules imposed upon them, such as the payment of protection money or forced recruitment into organised criminal groups.

Organised criminal groups target religious leaders, who often hold significant influence in their community, as a way to destabilise a community and to establish a culture of silence and terror. Criminal groups extort churches, attempting to coerce religious leaders into paying protection money or allowing their churches to be used for money laundering. Those who resist these efforts become targets. Religious leaders who are involved in social work and community outreach are especially vulnerable in areas of the country under the influence of criminal groups.

According to the Catholic Multimedia Centre (CCM), a cardinal, 62 priests, a deacon, four church employees, 23 lay leaders, and a Roman Catholic journalist were killed between

1990 and 2025. Two priests were forcibly disappeared during the same period.⁷ These statistics include Father Marcelo Pérez Pérez, 51, an indigenous Roman Catholic priest and human rights defender, who was shot and killed in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, after officiating Mass on 20 October 2024; Father Bertoldo Pantaléon Estrada, 59, parish priest in Mezcala Municipality, Guerrero, whose body was discovered with multiple gunshot wounds inside his vehicle on a highway on 6 October 2025; and Father Ernesto Baltazar Hernández Vilchis of the Diocese of Cuautitlán in Mexico State, who was reported missing at the end of October 2025 and whose death was confirmed a few weeks later, on 13 November, after his remains were discovered in a river in the Nextlalpan Municipality.

Threats and attacks against religious leaders are likely underreported, especially when it comes to Protestant Christian leaders, whose experiences have not been systematically documented. Cases often go unreported because of the high levels of fear of retaliation. Religious leaders note that authorities are quick to label these attacks and murders as ‘common crimes’ (often robberies gone wrong), rather than investigating the cases fully, which further distorts the statistics.

On 31 March 2026 Protestant Christian missionary Benito Guevara Arcos disappeared in the town of San Vicente, Chilpancingo de los Bravos Municipality, Guerrero, where he had travelled to preach and give out Bibles. A friend with whom he was staying later confirmed that Mr Guevara Arcos was being held by an organised criminal group which claimed to be investigating his identity, even though he had his official identification documents with him.

A few days later, the criminal group reportedly claimed that they had released him in the town of Amojileca, a 30km drive from San Vicente, on 4 April, and requested that a family member pick him up. Protestant Christians in the area sent two men in a pickup truck along the only road to Amojileca to search for the missionary but were unable to locate him. On 13 April Mr Guevara Arcos’ family filed a missing person report with the National Search Commission for Missing Persons in Guerrero and were provided with police protection as they posted flyers throughout the municipality. The case has received extensive local media coverage, and Mr Guevara Arcos is well-known in the area, however no-one has come forward with information regarding his wellbeing or whereabouts.

Recommendations

To the government of Mexico:

- Uphold legal guarantees for FoRB for all; and, in communities governed under Uses and Customs, ensure that these are practiced in accordance with Mexico’s constitution and its international human rights obligations.

⁷ Special Investigations Unit of the Catholic Multimedia Centre, Annual Report 2025: Violence against priests, religious and institutions of the Catholic Church in Mexico (Spanish) <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/51bf5868-d2d1-45a7-b5a6-964a26884784/Reporte%20Anula%202025%20OK%20B.pdf>

- Publicly recognise the important social role that religious leaders play, that their ministries often also involve a social aspect, and that as such they should be treated as human rights defenders and afforded protection, including from illegal armed groups, under the National Protection Mechanism for Human Rights Defenders and Journalists.
- Carry out thorough investigations into assassinations and kidnappings of and threats against religious leaders, to establish motive and to hold those responsible to account.
- Proactively increase efforts to address intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief, including by providing training for the judiciary and local authorities, ensuring that adequate support is given to displaced communities, and that water and sanitation services are unconditionally restored in cases where such rights have been denied.

To the government of the United States:

- The Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, once nominated and confirmed, should visit Mexico, following up on and reinforcing similar visits carried out by previous ambassadors in the same post.
- Given Mexico's failure to address the ongoing and severe FoRB violations, including forced displacement, that take place regularly, especially affecting indigenous communities, and to ensure that the right is upheld, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and the State Department should consider adding Mexico to their watchlists for violators of religious freedom.
- USCIRF Commissioners should request an invitation from the government of Mexico to visit the country, ensuring that this includes visits to the states with the highest incidence of serious FoRB violations and meetings with representatives of majority and minority religious groups, including those from indigenous communities.
- The US Embassy should continue to regularly engage with religious leaders, ensuring diverse representation in terms of religion or belief, ethnicity, and geographic location, especially those representing communities disproportionately affected by FoRB violations, and seek ways to support the work of FoRB defenders.
- Urge the government of Mexico, at every level and appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Mexico'.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- Urge all relevant UN mechanisms, including the Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to FoRB in their reporting on Mexico, addressing the vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief minorities.
- Encourage UN Special Procedures to request country visits to Mexico, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to FoRB, the Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Rights and other relevant mandate holders, and ensure that members of civil society can freely meet with them without reprisal.
- Utilise the Universal Periodic Review process, Human Rights Council sessions and other key international human rights instruments to raise FoRB concerns in Mexico and to offer recommendations to advance the right to FoRB.
- Call on the government of Mexico to work with the UN Division for Sustainable Development Goals to ensure 'no-one is left behind' in the realisation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Mexico, including SDGs on education, gender equality, water and sanitation and reducing inequalities.
- Ensure that the right to FoRB and other intersecting rights are consistently raised with the government of Mexico, including during high-level visits and other bilateral exchanges.
- Urge the government of Mexico, at every level and appropriate opportunity, to make the reforms highlighted in the recommendation section above 'To the government of Mexico'.

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