



Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **95.2%**
- Agnostics : **2.6%**
- Spiritists : **1.0%**
- Others : **1.2%**

48,654,000

1,141,748 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

Article one of the constitution of Colombia^[2] defines the country as a state bound by the rule of law. The constitution states that the republic is democratic, and pluralist and founded on the respect for human dignity, solidarity and the primacy of the general interest. The government oversees agencies which protect life, dignity, beliefs and other legally established individual liberties.

The Colombian state bans all forms of discrimination, including on religious grounds. The right to freedom of conscience, religion and worship are recognised as fundamental rights.^[3]

According to the Constitutional Court of Colombia, the highest court protecting fundamental rights, freedom of conscience is realised in three ways: “(i) no one may be subject to bullying or persecution because of their convictions or beliefs; (ii) no person shall be obliged to reveal their convictions, and (iii) no one shall be compelled to act against their conscience”.^[4] However, the right to freedom of conscience is not absolute and comes with limits based on respect for the rights of others.

Although closely linked, the right to freedom of conscience is understood in Colombia as a right distinct from that of religious freedom. Hence, the state of Colombia guarantees the right to freedom of conscience, while prohibiting activities opposed to religious beliefs.^[5]

Following on from a concordat with the Holy See, article 19 of the constitution states that “all religious faiths and churches are equally free before the law”.^[6] Hence, the Colombian Ministry of the Interior includes a Religious Affairs Bureau responsible for giving legal recognition to non-Catholic religious groups. According to Ministry of the Interior data, there are “6,500 religious entities in the state registry, and more than 90 percent of people profess a religious belief”^[7]

Christians represent 95 percent of the Colombian population, and 90.04 percent of them are Catholics.

On 6th March 2018, the Colombian Ministry of the Interior implemented Decree 437, a new Public Policy on Religious Freedom.^[8] It is too early to measure its success.

Incidents

In February 2017, the Constitutional Court ruled on a citizen initiative challenging the constitutionality of Law 891 of 2004, “by which the Processions of Holy Week and the Religious Music Festival of Popayán are declared part of the National Cultural Heritage”. Although the plaintiffs stated that this law violated freedom of religion and worship, the court ruled that there was no infringement on these rights since the law does not establish an official religion but simply declares such festivities as part of Colombia’s national cultural heritage. The court stated that the law complied with the constitutional obligation of the state to recognise and extol the nation’s non-material cultural heritage.^[9]

On 27th July 2017, Father Diomer Chavarría was assassinated in the parish of Puerto Valdivia. The clergyman “made the ultimate sacrifice in the exercise of his mission last night, 27th July”,^[10] said the diocese in a statement.

Father Abelardo Antonio Muñoz Sánchez, 41, was murdered when two criminals confronted him as he was getting out of a taxi on 3rd October 2018 in San Antonio, a neighbourhood in Rionegro, a town on the main road to La Ceja.^[11] That same month saw criminals desecrate a cemetery in the town of Palmira. Speaking about these and related incidents, Father Dimas Orozco, the parish priest of La Buitrera, said that there are “many people who practise satanic rituals and what they do is remove the bones of the deceased to perform sacrilegious acts”!^[12]

On 22nd May 2018, “a group of unidentified individuals attacked the Shrine of the Divine Mercy in Bogotá,” the Diocese of Fontibón reported. The criminals broke several windows of the shrine and damaged the parish office, the auditoriums and the clergy house, home of Fr Jesús Hernán Orjuela.^[13] Similarly, the cemeteries of Puente Sogamoso and Honda were desecrated.^[14]

Perhaps the legal proceedings that came closest to having religious connotations in Colombia was Judgement C-100 of 2018.^[15] On 22nd March, the Constitutional Court rejected an application by a prisoner who, as a Pentecostal, claimed that his rights to freedom of religion and worship were infringed upon because he was not allowed to work on Sundays and holidays to reduce his sentence. For him, his rights were being violated since he was forced to recognise Catholic holy days.^[16] In their ruling, the Court made it clear that such rights are not absolute and come with reasonable limits. In this particular case, the prisoner’s right to freedom of worship was not violated; instead, such a ban is intended to guarantee prisoners a time of rest, with the possibility of working on said days as long as the prison director permits it.^[17]

Prospects for freedom of religion

Religious freedom in Colombia is directly shaped by the country’s complex political situation, which has been overshadowed by conflict. A resurgence of violence has put clergy and other religious at risk, especially in areas of armed conflict.^[18] Incidents of this kind have multiplied over the past two years with the emergence of armed criminal gangs in several parts of the country. In these regions, violence has caused the displacement of more than 6.8 million Colombians over the last 50 years, including more than 63,000 last year and so far this year. This means that Colombia, according to the report of the Unified Victims Registry, has the second largest internally displaced population in the world after Syria.^[19]

Endnotes / Sources

[1] This report is based on the research project “Freedom of conscience and religious freedom in philosophy, theology and human rights. Scope and perceptions of its exercise in Colombia”, jointly undertaken by the Universidad de San

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[2] Colombia's Constitution of 1991 with Amendments through 2015, constituteproject.org, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Colombia_2015.pdf?lang=en, (accessed el 15th March 2018).

[3] Ibid.

[4] Corte Constitucional, Colombia, Sentencia SU-108 de 2016, <http://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/2016/SU108-16.htm>, (accessed el 15th April 2018).

[5] Corte Constitucional, Colombia, Sentencia T-823 de 2002, <http://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/2002/t-823-02.htm>, , (accessed 20th April 2018). , (accessed 20th April July 2018).

[6] Colombia's Constitution of 1991..., Article 9, op. cit.

[7] "Registro Publico ARNC BPM-22 AGOSTO 2017", Trámite de Reconocimiento de Personería Jurídica de Entidades Religiosas No Católicas", Ministerio del Interior, República de Colombia, <https://www.mininterior.gov.co/mision/asuntos-religiosos/registro-publico-de-entidades-religiosas>, , (accessed 8th June 2018).

[8] "Libertad religiosa y de culto, ahora política pública", Ministerio del Interior, República de Colombia, 5th January 2018, <http://www.mininterior.gov.co/sala-de-prensa/noticias/libertad-religiosa-y-de-culto-ahora-politica-publica-0>, (accessed 1st July 2018); Política Pública Integral de Libertad Religiosa y de Cultos, Ministerio del Interior, República de Colombia, 2017, https://asuntosreligiosos.mininterior.gov.co/sites/default/files/documento_tecnico_politica_publica_integral_de_libertad_religiosa_y (accessed 1st July 2018).

[9] Corte Constitucional, Colombia, Sentencia C-109 de 2017, <http://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/2017/T-152-17.htm>, (accessed 15th May 2018).

[10] Mateo Isaza Giraldo, "Sacerdote fue asesinado dentro de parroquia en Puerto Valdivia", Colombiano, 28th July 2017, <http://www.elcolombiano.com/antioquia/seguridad/asesinato-de-sacerdote-diomer-eliver-chavarria-perez-YB7003540>, (accessed 1st July 2018).

[11] "Priest killed in Rionegro, the second in Colombia in 2017", Agenzia Fides, 4th October 2017, http://www.fides.org/en/news/63006-AMERICA_COLOMBIA_Priest_killed_in_Rionegro_the_second_in_Colombia_in_2017, (accessed 1st July 2018).

[12] "Denuncian profanación de tumbas en cementerio de zona rural de Palmira", El País, 30th October 2017, <http://www.elpais.com.co/valle/denuncian-profanacion-de-tumbas-cementerio-zona-rural-palmira.html>, (accessed 1st July 2018).

[13] "Atacan santuario de la Divina Misericordia en Colombia [VIDEO]", Aciprensa, 35th May 2018, <https://www.aciprensa.com/noticias/atacan-santuario-de-la-divina-misericordia-en-colombia-video-25010>, (accessed 1st July 2018).

[14] "Denuncian profanación de tumbas en Honda", 790 AM, 9th November 2017, <http://www.ecosdelcombeima.com/judiciales/nota-115843-denuncian-profanacion-de-tumbas-honda>, (accessed 1st July 2018).

[15] Corte Constitucional, Colombia, Sentencia C-100 de 2018, <http://www.corteconstitucional.gov.co/relatoria/2018/T-100-18.htm>, (accessed 1st July 2018).

[16] Rural or peripheral urban areas where various outlawed armed groups (narco-guerrilla, large and small-scale drug traffickers petty criminals) have a strong influence and control.

[17] Decreto Número 437 de 2018, 6th March 2018, Ministerio del Interior, República de Colombia, <http://es.presidencia.gov.co/normativa/normativa/DECRETO%20437%20DEL%2006%20MARZO%20DE%202018.pdf>, (accessed 25th May 2018).

[18] “Atacan santuario de la Divina Misericordia en Colombia [VIDEO]”, op. cit.

[19] “Colombia Events of 2016”, World Report 2017, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/colombia>, (accessed 1st July 2018); “”, 30th mese 201 , <https://rni.unidadvictimas.gov.co/RUV>, (accessed 1st July 2018); Colombia Events of 2017”, World Report 2018, Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/colombia>, (accessed 1st July 2018); “ONU alerta por el aumento desmedido de desplazamientos forzados en Colombia”, CNN Español, 19th February 2018, <https://cnnespanol.cnn.com/2018/02/19/onu-alerta-por-el-aumento-desmedido-de-desplazamientos-forzados-en-colombia/>, (accessed 1st July 2018).