



# Country Overviews and Case Studies of Mexico, Colombia, and Cuba

Briefing prepared for the Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the UK Foreign Secretary of Foreign and Commonwealth Office Support for Persecuted Christians.

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## 1. Mexico

### 1.1 Country overview

With more than 125 million inhabitants, Mexico is the largest Spanish-speaking country in the world. In spite of the fact that 95.9% of its population self-identifies as Christian (WCD 2017),<sup>1</sup> specific subgroups of Christians experience different forms of persecution. These forms of persecution can be referred to as “anticlericalism,” “ethno-religious conflict,” and “organized crime.”

Although article 24 of Mexico's constitution enshrines religious freedom and Mexico is a signatory to all major international human rights treaties, the country is one of the most anticlerical regimes in Latin America and places significant restrictions on religious institutions in general. Although Mexico's anticlericalism is not as stringent as it used to be at the time of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), especially since the adoption of a series of constitutional amendments in 1992, it continues to place restrictions on religious freedom.<sup>2</sup> According to the

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<sup>1</sup> Center for the Study of Global Christianity (2017). *World Christian Database*. Retrieved 16 April 2019, from <https://www.worldchristiandatabase.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> Gill A. (2008). *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Religion and State Project (Bar-Ilan University, Israel), the separation between state and church remains strict, with some forms of religious expression being forbidden in the public sphere. Religious education is allowed only for private schools. At the state and local levels, evangelism and access to media broadcasts are, in practice, often restricted to Protestants<sup>3</sup> (This may change in the near future, as Mexico's President, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, has requested the Ministry of the Interior draft a legal initiative to reform the Law of Religious Associations and Public Worship so that churches can be concessionaires of public television and radio channels "in order to spread moral values."<sup>4</sup>).

At the present time, the historic anticlericalism is reinforced by the activism of a number of leading opinion makers who oppose any form of religious expression in the public sphere by confessional actors.<sup>5</sup> It will remain to be seen, however, how the dynamics between the state and churches evolve in the short term, with the rapprochement between the new president and certain religious groups, especially Protestants.

There is considerable pressure on Christians in indigenous and peasant areas in Mexico. The broad protection for *usos y costumbres* [uses and habits] often conflicts with legal norms related to freedom of worship. As a result, Christians have been fined, jailed, beaten, or displaced because of their faith. This dynamic manifests itself mainly in indigenous areas and in collective farms (*ejidos*). These generally oppose "traditionalists," who often practice a syncretic mix of pre-colonial and post-colonial beliefs, and converts to new religious movements, such as Pentecostalism or the Catholic Renewal Movement. While this dynamic is widely recognized by various reports and international outlets,<sup>6</sup> it is often mistakenly presented as a conflict opposing Catholics and Protestants; it should rather be viewed as a form of ethno-religious conflict in which the behavior of actively practicing Christian groups conflicts with the political and economic interests of community leaders.<sup>7</sup>

In areas that are controlled by organized crime, the enforcement of religious freedom is a major issue. Violence is pervasive but affects actively practicing Christians to a high degree. Pressure from organized crime cartels or networks, sometimes with the complicity of corrupt government officials, is experienced by actively practicing Christians in community life and often causes extremely high levels of violence. A number of reports have stressed the impact of organized crime on Christians. For example, a report by the International Crisis Group on criminal cartels and rule of law in Mexico refers to priests, although the report chooses to focus

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<sup>3</sup> Fox J. (2014). Religion and State dataset, <http://www.religionandstate.org>; Fox J. (2015). *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> "AMLO pretende dar a la Iglesia canales de TV y radio para moralizar al país", *El Sol de México*, 13/03/2019. Retrieved 18/06/2019, from <https://www.elsoldemexico.com.mx/mexico/politica/amlo-pretende-dar-a-la-iglesia-canales-de-tv-y-radio-para-moralizar-al-pais-iniciativa-reforma-ley-de-asociaciones-religiosas-y-culto-publico-religion-catolica-3182093.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "Estado laico bajo amenaza", *SDP Noticias*, 18/08/2016. Retrieved 14 June 2019, from <https://www.sdpnoticias.com/nacional/2016/08/18/estado-laico-bajo-amenaza>.

<sup>6</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) (2012-2017). *2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 Annual Report*. Retrieved 15 March 2017, from <https://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report>; US Department of State (2013-2018). *2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 Report on International Religious Freedom*. Retrieved 15 March 2019, from <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>; Pew Research Center (2017). *Global Restrictions on Religion Rise Modestly in 2015, Reversing Downward Trend*. Washington DC: Pew Research Center.

<sup>7</sup> Kovic C. (2007). Indigenous Conversion to Catholicism: Change of Heart in Chiapas, Mexico. In T.J. Steigenga & E.L. Cleary (eds.) *Conversion of a Continent. Contemporary Religious Change in Latin America* (pp. 199-217). New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

on journalists and human rights defenders (2013:30).<sup>8</sup> The *International Religious Freedom* report by the US State Department mentions “priests and other religious leaders in some parts of the country continued to be targeted and received extortion attempts, death threats, and intimidation, often from organized criminal groups” (2015).<sup>9</sup> In hearings at the US Congress, “narco-persecution” in Mexico has also been denounced.<sup>10</sup>

## 1.2 Case study: Mexico is the most dangerous country in the world for priests: 26 priests killed between 2012 and 2018

Case is referenced by:

- **Catholic Multimedia Center (Mexico):** 26 sacerdotes asesinados 2012-2018 [26 priests murdered between 2012-2018] [<http://ccm.org.mx/2018/12/reporte-sacerdotes-2018/>] Accessed June 2019
- **Aid to the Church in Need:** Mexico is one of the most dangerous countries for priests [<https://www.churchinneed.org/mexico-one-dangerous-countries-priests/>] Accessed June 2019
- **Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America: Violent Incidents Database** [<http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/search/results?t=0&c=43&ini=2018-01-01&fin=2019-06-05&do=10&pe=8&pc=>] Accessed June 2019

A selection of international news outlets:

- **USA Today:** Why are so many priests in Mexico being murdered? [<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/04/24/priests-mexico-murdered-crime-dangerous-latin-america/541423002/>] Accessed June 2019.
- **Borderland Beat:** Mexico’s Clericide: 26 Priests Murdered in the Sexenium of EPN [<http://www.borderlandbeat.com/2018/12/mexicos-clericide-26-priests-murdered.html>] Accessed June 2019.
- **The Guardian:** Priest found dead in Mexico in the same week as two others were killed [<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/26/mexico-priest-killings-found-dead>] Accessed June 2019
- **Modern Tokyo Times:** Mexico is the most dangerous place to be a Catholic Priest: Lawlessness and drug cartels [<http://moderntokyotimes.com/mexico-is-the-most-dangerous-place-to-be-a-catholic-priest-lawlessness-and-drug-cartels/>] Accessed June 2019
- **World Watch Monitor:** Mexico still ‘most dangerous country to be a priest’ [<https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/coe/mexico-still-most-dangerous-country-to-be-a-priest/>] Accessed June 2019

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<sup>8</sup> International Crisis Group (ICG) (2013). *Peña Nieto’s Challenge: Criminal Cartels and Rule of Law in Mexico*. Retrieved 15 March 2019, from <https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/mexico/pena-nieto-s-challenge-criminal-cartels-and-rule-law-mexico>.

<sup>9</sup> US Department of State (2013-2018). *2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 Report on International Religious Freedom*. Retrieved 15 March 2019, from <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>

<sup>10</sup> Congressional hearing on “The Worldwide Persecution of Christians”, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, United States Congress, 11 February 2014; Congressional hearing on “Freedom of Expression in the Americas”, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, United States Congress, 17 September 2015.

### A selection of Mexican outlets:

- **Excelsior:** El más peligroso para el sacerdocio: México; cifras del Vaticano 2018 para América [The most dangerous for the priesthood: Mexico; 2018 figures on America from the Vatican] [<https://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/el-mas-peligroso-para-el-sacerdocio-mexico-cifras-del-vaticano-2018-para-america/1287964>] Accessed June 2019
- **Jornada:** México, el país más peligroso de AL para ejercer el sacerdocio [Mexico, the most dangerous country in Latin America to exercise priesthood] [<https://www.jornada.com.mx/2018/10/30/politica/020n1pol>] Accessed June 2019.
- **El Siglo de Durango:** ‘México, país más peligroso para ser religioso’ [‘Mexico, the most dangerous country to be a minister’] [<https://www.elsiglodedurango.com.mx/noticia/950535.mexico-pais-mas-peligroso-para-ser-religioso.html>] Accessed June 2019

### A selection of international organizations:

- **United States Department of State:** 2017 Report on International Religious Freedom: Mexico [<https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-report-on-international-religious-freedom/mexico/>] Accessed June 2019.
- **United States Department of State:** 2017 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Mexico [<https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/mexico/>] Accessed June 2019.
- **Christian Solidarity Worldwide:** HRC40: Oral Statement during adoption of Mexico UPR outcome [<https://www.csw.org.uk/2019/04/02/report/4290/article.htm>] Accessed June 2019.
- **United Nations Human Right Council:** 40th session of the Human Rights Council (25 February - 22 March 2019) [<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/RegularSessions/Session40/Pages/40RegularSession.aspx>] Accessed June 2019.

**Short summary:** At the end of the six-year presidential term (2012-2018), a total of 26 priests were reported to have been murdered. Investigations indicate that the perpetrators were members of criminal groups and that the killings were committed mainly in Mexico City, Guerrero, Veracruz, Chihuahua, and Michoacán. Religious ministers are a target for criminal groups because their activities represent a threat to their “stability” and interests.

**Event:** Instead of describing each particular case, the following overview of the events that occurred in 2018 will suffice to illustrate the degree of violence and persecution against the Church in Mexico:

1. Priest Germaín Muñiz García and Priest Iván Añorve Jimenez, murdered on the Iguala-Taxco highway on 4 February.
2. Priest Rubén Alcántara Díaz, murdered with a knife inside his parish on 18 April.
3. Priest Juan Miguel Contreras García, shot inside his parish in April.
4. Priest José Moisés Fabila Reyes, kidnapped and found dead in April. Because of his weak health, he could not withstand the situation of violence.
5. Priest Miguel Gerardo Flores Hernández, disappeared and found dead due to gunfire in August.
6. Priest Ícmar Arturo Orta, disappeared and found dead due to gunfire in October.

According to the Catholic Multimedia Center (CMC), those who act against priests and believers seek to restrict pastoral work in areas where other civil, political, or governmental entities have little presence. When a priest is assaulted, reported missing, or executed, “an element of social destabilization” is introduced, giving rise to the growth of fear, impunity, and violence.

The director of the CMC, Priest Omar Sotelo, has pointed out that “freedom of worship in Mexico is being decimated, undermined, and threatened by organized crime” and that the high risk that priests, chaplains, and religious volunteers face has made this work one of the most dangerous in Mexico—comparable with Pakistan, India, Turkey, and Egypt. He has referred to this phenomenon as “clericide.”

In an interview with *Borderland Beat* he declared that, “After the period of the Cristero War, Peña's administration was the most disastrous and tragic for the Mexican priesthood (...) During the administration of Ernesto Zedillo, 3 priests were killed, with Vicente Fox in office there were 4, but with Calderón the crimes went off the charts to 17, and with Peña to 26.”

News outlets such as *World Watch Monitor* state that violence affects actively practicing Christians and that those priests who dare to denounce links between government officials with organized crime leaders receive death threats. In this context, Priest Sotelo mentioned possible alliances between organized crime and politicians as well as judges and certain circles within the police and security forces, which allows organized crime to become even more powerful, “Causing decay in society from top to bottom.”

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom reports that Catholic priests and other religious leaders continued to be targeted and were the victims of killings, extortion attempts, death threats, kidnappings, and intimidation by organized criminal groups. Although federal government officials maintain that these incidents were not a result of targeting for religious beliefs but rather incidents related to overall crime, this leads to worsening an already vulnerable situation since the indifference with which the authorities handle these issues impact the human security of religious leaders.

This indifference is well known, even in the 40th session of the Human Rights Council. During the adoption of the outcome of the universal periodic review for Mexico, Christian Solidarity Worldwide stated it was not only concerned by killings of religious leaders and pervasive impunity, but it also urged Mexico to afford religious leaders the same protection as human rights defenders. It regretted the lack of recommendations on the right to freedom of religion or belief for religious minorities and referred to measures taken by some local authorities to impede this right.

USA Today reported that some civilians see the murder of priests as a consequence of the church's call to end drug-related violence. This means that drug lords kill anyone who dares to speak against injustice and crime, even if he is a priest.

The Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE) documents and publicizes these cases through the Violent Incidents Database. On the basis of this effort, pertinent policy strategies to care for the victims and to implement prevention measures for vulnerable religious groups can be developed.



## Analysis:

The Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America has identified that Mexicans who are actively practicing Christians, that is, Christians who regularly practice their faith, are a minority, and that this minority is specifically vulnerable to suffering human rights abuses. Hence, pastoral activities and, more generally, influential religious behavior within society, especially in areas that are co-opted by criminal groups, put the physical integrity and well-being of religious ministers, parishioners, and even of their families at risk. For these organizations, religious convictions that contradict the criminal ideology represent a threat to their control in the area and their stability. As long as the Church constitutes an obstacle to them, they will likely harass and threaten its members and leaders in order to weaken it and prevent its influence on society, and especially on young people.

It is important to keep in mind that most of the priests murdered in the 2012-2018 period were somehow involved in an active pastoral life in the community and/or trying to engage young people in the Christian life to deter them from a life of crime or prevent them from being enlisted in the ranks of the cartels.

In this context, the vulnerability to the human security threats that this group faces is increasingly difficult to manage for the following reasons:

- i) Violence and insecurity have increased in the country. In recent months, Mexico faced one of its greatest crises of insecurity. According to the Index of Peace (2019), in 2018, peace had a decline of 4.9%. The main reason for this deterioration was the increase of the homicide rate at the hands of criminal groups.<sup>11</sup>
- ii) Because of the government's lack of effectiveness, many religious groups become de facto human rights defenders in indigenous, rural, and migrant communities, precisely as a result of widespread violence; so they are exposed to acts of intimidation, threats and, as we have seen, homicides perpetrated by criminal groups. To date, due to the migration crisis in which the country is submerged in, this aspect is especially relevant.<sup>12</sup>
- iii) Another endemic problem in Mexico is corruption and impunity. Often, criminal groups act in collusion with local authorities to carry out their activities, which implies that any crime or reprisal against those who oppose these groups is not properly prosecuted or sanctioned; this context intimidates the rest of the religious leaders and inhibits them from denouncing or carrying out pastoral activities that may "hinder" organized crime.<sup>13</sup>
- iv) Authorities in almost all cases are indifferent to the reasons behind the attacks against religious leaders or active Christians in their communities. They tend to consider the motivations resulting from pure economic or personal interests, and sometimes they have even suggested that the victims had links with organized

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<sup>11</sup> Institute for Economics & Peace, (2019), Mexico Index of Peace [<http://indicedepazmexico.org/>] Accessed June 2019.

<sup>12</sup> "Alejandro Solalinde: "Many people want me dead"", *Amnesty International*, 23/01/2018. [<https://www.es.amnesty.org/en-que-estamos/blog/historia/articulo/alejandro-solalinde-son-muchos-los-que-me-quieren-muerto/>] Accessed June 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Since 2012, Mexico has seen a sharp decline in its score, failing to make significant progress against corruption. The Corruption Perception Index 2018 ranks Mexico in the 138<sup>th</sup> position of 180, with a 28/100 score (0 = highly corrupt and 100 = very clean). Transparency International, (2018), Corruption Perception Index [<https://www.transparency.org/country/MEX>] Accessed June 2019.

crime.<sup>14</sup> This way of dealing with the problem prevents counteracting the causes and therefore it is not possible to create strategies from the government that effectively succeed in safeguarding the work of these religious leaders.

In this scenario, although the new government presented and approved the National Peace and Security Plan 2018-2024 to deal with organized crime in the country, it is still too early to know if the measures to be applied, including the polemic creation of the National Guard,<sup>15</sup> will be effective or not. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether religious leaders and members of religious organizations will be recognized as particularly vulnerable populations in contexts of violence or not. So far, religious leaders have implemented security protocols themselves to guarantee, as far as possible, their effective protection.<sup>16</sup>

### 1.3 Violent incidents of persecution against Christians in Mexico (2011-2018)

Mexico	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Killings	1	5	10	3	3	20	15	16
(Attempts) to destroy Churches or Christian buildings	0	2	3	2	2	2	9	34
Closed Churches or Christian buildings	1	0	4	2	0	0	0	3
Arrests	0	56	38	9	0	1	6	10
Sentences	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Abductions	1	1	7	0	1	5	83	2
Sexual Assaults	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Forced Marriages	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other forms of attack (physical or mental abuse)	81	240	650	131	0	8	205	28
Attacked Christian houses	3	20	23	13	0	2	2	9
Attacked Christian shops or businesses	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Forced to leave Home	0	71	206	23	0	21	116	27
Forced to leave Country	0	92	230	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (2019). Violent Incidents Database, [www.violentincidents.com](http://www.violentincidents.com).

<sup>14</sup> “Nexus of priest murdered with criminal group are denied”, *Enfoque Noticias*, 02/07/2018. [\[https://enfquenoticias.com.mx/noticias/niegan-nexos-de-sacerdote-asesinado-con-grupo-delictivo\]](https://enfquenoticias.com.mx/noticias/niegan-nexos-de-sacerdote-asesinado-con-grupo-delictivo) Accessed June 2019.

<sup>15</sup> “What is the significance of the creation of the National Guard for Mexico?”, *Amnesty International*, 03/06/2019 [\[https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/03/que-significa-para-mexico-la-aprobacion-de-la-guardia-nacional/\]](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/03/que-significa-para-mexico-la-aprobacion-de-la-guardia-nacional/) Accessed June 2019

<sup>16</sup> “Ecclesiastical Security Protocol” (2018), Mexican Episcopal Conference [\[https://www.cem.org.mx/Slider/272-ver-detalle.html\]](https://www.cem.org.mx/Slider/272-ver-detalle.html) Accessed June 2019.

## 2. Colombia

### 2.1 Country overview

The dynamics of persecution of Christians in Colombia are to a large degree comparable to Mexico's, with the biggest difference being that the state regulation of religion is much less severe. Since the adoption of the 1991 Constitution (article 19, ratified by the 1994 religious freedom law), the separation between the Catholic Church and the state was implemented, and religious freedom was fully recognized.<sup>17</sup> The available data on Colombia collected by the Religion and State Project points to a univocal conclusion: government involvement in religion is limited, especially in comparison to Mexico. Not only has Colombia no official religion, the levels of religious discrimination and religious regulation are low. Putting some sporadic elements of favoritism of the majority religion (Catholicism) aside, it can be concluded that the relation between religion and state is not putting any religious minority in a vulnerable position.<sup>18</sup> This statement holds true when observing the religious freedom situation at the national level, but completely ignores very different subnational realities.

First of all, there is the atypical situation of the indigenous reserves where religious freedom for minorities is not guaranteed. Converts to Christianity are seen as a threat to the power of local fiefs and indigenous ancestral traditions, and are particularly vulnerable to suffer human rights abuses. Because of the far-reaching self-government rights of indigenous reserves, it is nearly impossible for the Colombian state to guarantee religious freedom.<sup>19</sup> Converts to Christianity in indigenous communities face all forms of harassment and discrimination, including exclusion from basic social services. Christian schools are hardly tolerated. In the church sphere, freedom of Christians is also very much restricted, as any Christian activity is considered a threat to the political power of indigenous leaders.<sup>20</sup>

Large areas of the country continue to be under the control of criminal organizations, drug cartels, revolutionaries, and paramilitary groups. In a context of generalized impunity, all inhabitants of Colombia suffer from the conflict that has lasted for decades, but Christians are specifically vulnerable to such hostilities. Notwithstanding the peace agreement that was adopted between the Colombian government and FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) in 2016, the country is not becoming safer. The peace agreement has not been implemented in the way that was expected. As a result, dissident factions have taken control of the areas previously controlled by the FARC, joining criminal gangs who operate within a context of impunity, corruption, anarchy, drug wars, and structural violence. Within such a framework, Christians are a vulnerable group that, because of its mere presence, constitutes a

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<sup>17</sup> Díaz Escandón S. (2009). *Derechos y Obligaciones de las Iglesias y Confesiones Religiosas Frente a la Ley Colombia: Génesis y desarrollo de la libertad religiosa y de cultos en Colombia*. Bogotá: Instituto Cristiano de Estudios Sociales y Políticos "Juan Calvino" ICES.

<sup>18</sup> Fox J. (2014). Religion and State dataset, <http://www.religionandstate.org>; Fox J. (2015). *Political Secularism, Religion, and the State*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Christian Solidarity Worldwide, *Report: Freedom of religion or belief*, 26/02/2016. Retrieved 14/06/2019, from <https://www.csw.org.uk/2016/02/26/report/2997/article.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) (2012-2017). *2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 Annual Report*. Retrieved 15 March 2017, from <https://www.uscifr.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report>; US Department of State (2013-2018). *2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 Report on International Religious Freedom*. Retrieved 15 March 2019, from <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>; Pew Research Center (2017). *Global Restrictions on Religion Rise Modestly in 2015, Reversing Downward Trend*. Washington DC: Pew Research Center.



threat to the hegemony of criminal organizations. Christianity represents an alternative way to behave in society, especially for young people, which makes churches a direct competitor of criminal organizations.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.2 Case study: Father Abelardo Antonio Muñoz Sánchez killed in Rionegro

Case is referenced by:

- **Agenzia Fides:** Priest killed in Rionegro, the second in Colombia in 2017 [[http://www.fides.org/en/news/63006-AMERICA\\_COLOMBIA\\_Priest\\_killed\\_in\\_Rionegro\\_the\\_second\\_in\\_Colombia\\_in\\_2017](http://www.fides.org/en/news/63006-AMERICA_COLOMBIA_Priest_killed_in_Rionegro_the_second_in_Colombia_in_2017)] Accessed June 2019.
- **Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America: Violent Incidents Database** [<http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3810>] Accessed June 2019.

A selection of international news outlets:

- **Catholic News World:** Catholic Priest Killed in Colombia by Thieves - RIP Fr. Abelardo Sanchez - Age 41 [<https://www.catholicnewsworld.com/2017/10/breakingnews-catholic-priest-killed-in.html>] Accessed June 2019.
- **Vatican News:** Twenty-three Church pastoral workers killed worldwide in 2017 [<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2017-12/catholic-church-pastoral-workers-killed-2017-fides.html>] Accessed June 2019.
- **Aid to the Church in Need:** Religious Freedom Report 2018 [<https://religious-freedom-report.org/report/?report=178>] Accessed June 2019.

A selection of Colombian outlets:

- **El Espectador:** Asesinan a un sacerdote en Rionegro luego de un intento de robo [Priest murdered in Rionegro after an attempted robbery] [<https://www.elespectador.com/noticias/nacional/antioquia/tras-un-intento-de-robo-asesinan-sacerdote-en-rionegro-articulo-716400>] Accessed June 2019.
- **El Colombiano:** Capturan a hombre que habría asesinado a sacerdote en Rionegro [Presumed killer of priest in Rionegro is captured] [<https://www.elcolombiano.com/antioquia/seguridad/capturan-a-asesino-del-sacerdote-abelardo-antonio-munoz-muerto-en-fleteo-en-rionegro-NX9716593>] Accessed June 2019.
- **El Universal:** Asesinan a sacerdote en intento de robo en Rionegro, Antioquia [In an attempted robbery, a priest in Rionegro - Antioquia is murdered] [<https://www.eluniversal.com.co/colombia/asesinan-sacerdote-en-intento-de-robo-en-rionegro-antioquia-263395-MUEU376138>] Accessed June 2019.
- **Noticias Caracol:** En el centro de Medellín cae quien sería el homicida de reconocido sacerdote del Oriente antioqueño [The presumed murderer of the well-known priest of East Antioquia was arrested in the center of Medellín]

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<sup>21</sup> Petri D.P. (2012). *Interface of Churches and Organised Crime in Latin America*. Harderwijk: Open Doors International; Petri D.P. (2015). "Challenges to religious freedom in the Americas": *Testimony before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, House Committee on Foreign Affairs*. Washington DC: US Congress.

[\[https://noticias.caracoltv.com/medellin/en-el-centro-de-medellin-cae-quien-seria-el-homicida-de-reconocido-sacerdote-del-oriente-antioqueno\]](https://noticias.caracoltv.com/medellin/en-el-centro-de-medellin-cae-quien-seria-el-homicida-de-reconocido-sacerdote-del-oriente-antioqueno) Accessed June 2019.

### **A selection of international organizations:**

- **United States Department of State:** 2017 Report on International Religious Freedom: Colombia [\[https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-report-on-international-religious-freedom/colombia/\]](https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-report-on-international-religious-freedom/colombia/) Accessed June 2019.

**Short summary:** On 3 October 2017, in Río Negro-Antioquia, two delinquents attacked Father Abelardo Antonio Muñoz Sánchez, priest of the diocese of Girardota. The criminals tried to steal money he brought with him. Because the priest resisted, they shot him. Father Muñoz had been a priest for ten years and had served the community for only four months.

**Event:** Abelardo Antonio Muñoz Sánchez was a Catholic priest in charge of the temple of Cisneros in the northeast of Antioquia. On 3 October, 2017, four months after he started to serve the community, he was on his way to the neighborhood of San Antonio in Rionegro to visit his mother. That day, two criminals attacked him while he was traveling in a taxi. Noticias Caracol reported three more people were in the vehicle who were not injured.

Agenzia Fides reported that according to information provided by Javier Morales Cárdenas, Deputy Police Commander of Antioquia, two criminals approached the priest, who was getting out of a taxi. “He was approached by two people on a scooter, who intimidated him with a gun because they wanted his wallet. After the priest refused to hand over his wallet, the criminals shot him several times, causing his death,” said Morales. Other sources such as El Universal and El Espectador stated that the priest carried a bag of cash with him, which the criminals wanted to steal.

El Espectador and Noticias Caracol reported that on the day of the murder of the priest, one of the alleged perpetrators of this crime was arrested. Almost a year later, on 26 November 2018, El Colombiano reported that the authorities of Rionegro confirmed the capture in Medellín of the man accused of murdering the priest. As mentioned in the official report, the arrest of the alleged murderer, identified as Wilder Orlando Quintero Monsalve, also known as “Rodador,” occurred after a search operation in the streets of Antioquía. To date, the legal proceedings against the accused of murdering priest Abelardo are unknown.

### **Analysis:**

Uninformed observers could jump to the conclusion that this case is “not about persecution, but about crime,” failing to recognize that such acts happen continuously and severely hinder the ministry of church ministers. At the Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (OLIRE), we have recognized that although actively practicing Christians—with influence and authority in society—are specifically vulnerable to suffering human rights abuses. In areas co-opted by criminal groups, organized crime networks not only compete with religion for legitimacy and authority but also have purely economic motivations. As a result, organized crime puts at risk both religious activities and the well-being of Christians. Often, religious leaders are more vulnerable to these kinds of attacks because criminals know they do not fight back.

As can be observed in the Violent Incidents Database of OLIRE, numerous other cases of vulnerability of religious leaders and their communities occurred in 2018 in Colombia:

- i) 11 million pesos collected at a fundraising banquet organized by a Christian community was stolen.<sup>22</sup>
- ii) Delinquents entered the Church of the Divine Child to rob the priest who had just returned from the bank.<sup>23</sup>
- iii) A man who pretended to be a parishioner stole the money from a fundraising activity,<sup>24</sup> and
- iv) A monastery was robbed four times and the nuns who live there continue to worry about their safety.<sup>25</sup>

It can be concluded that churches and its priests are targets of violence, threats, and sometimes extortion because they are known to raise large sums of money (tithes); the same applies to social activities promoted by associations or religious ministers that generate income. Even the sacred objects of religious temples are at the mercy of criminals who see in them only the commercial value. In general, neither the temples nor religious ministers are provided with appropriate security to prevent these types of events.

This situation develops in a country that is experiencing a new historical phase after the signing of the peace agreement with the guerrillas of the FARC, in which, in the face of obstacles and a slow peacebuilding with the Colombian guerrillas, and in addition to the civilian population, those who pay the price and become the main targets of violence and insecurity are also missionaries and religious ministers.

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<sup>22</sup> Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (2018) Violent Incidents Database, “Parish house robbed” [<http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3639>] Accessed June 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (2018) Violent Incidents Database, “Parishioners and even the priest were robbed inside a church” [<http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3637>] Accessed June 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (2018) Violent Incidents Database, “Man robbed and attacked a priest inside a church” [<http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3636>] Accessed June 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (2018) Violent Incidents Database, “Cali nuns are frightened by series of robberies in a monastery” [<http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/incident/3646>] Accessed June 2019.

## 2.3 Violent incidents of persecution against Christians in Colombia (2011-2018)

Colombia	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Killings	0	1	11	7	0	2	2	7
(Attempts) to destroy Churches or Christian buildings	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	15
Closed Churches or Christian buildings	0	2	151	11	0	0	0	3
Arrests	0	0	12	1	3	0	0	5
Sentences	0	0	0	0	0	0	7	5
Abductions	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0
Sexual Assaults	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Forced Marriages	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0
Other forms of attack (physical or mental abuse)	1	39	545	206	12	3	9	163
Attacked Christian houses	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	3
Attacked Christian shops or businesses	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Forced to leave Home	0	0	34	173	119	1	18	91
Forced to leave Country	0	38	6	0	0	0	0	2

Source: Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (2019). Violent Incidents Database, [www.violentincidents.com](http://www.violentincidents.com).

## 3. Cuba

### 3.1 Country overview

Cuba is one of the few remaining communist regimes in the world. In 2018, Raúl Castro, the country's president and Fidel Castro's brother, was replaced by Miguel Díaz-Canel, but the regime stayed essentially the same and expected changes did not occur. Cuba has continued to isolate itself from the rest of the world and function under totalitarian control. The new constitution, adopted by referendum on 24 February 2019, only tightens the regime's grip of Cuban society.<sup>26</sup>

The persecution of Christians, while more severe in the past, is now slowly changing. Although the persecution of Christians in the past included beatings, imprisonment, and sometimes murder, now oppression is generally more subtle. It continues in the form of harassment, strict surveillance, and discrimination, including the occasional imprisonment of leaders. Religious practice is monitored and all church services are infiltrated by spies; Christians are threatened and suffer discrimination in school and at work.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Constitución de la República de Cuba (2019), <http://www.cnctv.icrt.cu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Nueva-Constitucion-240-KB.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Pastor J.A. & Petri D.P. (2018). *Cuba: New names, but the same approach: Changes after elections*. Retrieved 14/06/2019, from <https://platformforsocialtransformation.org/download/religiousfreedom/Petri-Pastor-Cuba-New-names-but-the-same-approach.pdf>.

Religious groups complain about widespread surveillance and infiltration by state security agents. Pastors and Christians are sometimes put under pressure to stop evangelizing and to limit their activities to their own church premises. Permission to print Christian literature locally is hard to obtain. Bibles, Bible study materials, and Sunday school materials are in extremely short supply. Everything is restricted. Existing seminaries and church buildings may be used, but new churches and seminaries cannot be built. Legal procedures to get permission to build are excessively slow. Evangelism is allowed, and even foreigners may request a “religious visa,” but it is not possible to mention the human rights situation and politics.<sup>28</sup>

In combination with the imposition of restrictions, the Cuban regime has also implemented a cooptation strategy towards Protestants by inviting them to join the *Consejo de Iglesias de Cuba*, *CIC [Cuban Council of Churches]*, a state-controlled body, similar to the Three Self Church in China, which is a church that was created by the Chinese government and is controlled by it (Koesel 2013).<sup>29</sup> The CIC is not representative of Cuban Protestantism because its members only include a small subset of registered denominations and none of the unregistered denominations that are quickly growing. After decades of disagreements with the CIC, seven Protestant denominations have now formed the “Alliance of Cuban Evangelical Churches,” which aspires to be a united front against government intimidation of Christians.<sup>30</sup> It is likely that this alliance will be declared illegal by the Office of Religious Affairs of the Cuban Communist Party, who has recently ordered a number of pastors who had voiced their opposition to the new constitution to be arrested.<sup>31</sup>

### **3.2 Case study: Continued harassment and arrests led Pastor Mario Felix Leonart Barroso to leave the island**

Case is referenced by:

- **Christian Solidarity Worldwide:** Freedom of religion or belief in Cuba [<https://www.csw.org.uk/2016/08/11/report/3215/article.htm>] Accessed June 2019.
- **Open Doors Analytical:** Pastor arrested before President Obama’s visits the island [<http://opendoorsanalytical.org/cuba-pastor-arrested-before-president-obamas-visits-the-island/>] Accessed June 2019 (password = “freedom”).
- **Mario Félix Leonart Barroso:** Written testimony for the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere hearing on “Deplorable Human Rights Violations in Cuba and

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<sup>28</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) (2012-2017). *2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 Annual Report*. Retrieved 15 March 2017, from <https://www.uscirf.gov/reports-briefs/annual-report/>; US Department of State (2013-2018). *2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 Report on International Religious Freedom*. Retrieved 15 March 2019, from <https://www.state.gov/international-religious-freedom-reports/>; Pew Research Center (2017). *Global Restrictions on Religion Rise Modestly in 2015, Reversing Downward Trend*. Washington DC: Pew Research Center.

<sup>29</sup> Koesel K.J. (2013). The Rise of a Chinese House Church: The Organizational Weapon. *The China Quarterly* 215: 572-589.

<sup>30</sup> “Protestant denominations launch new evangelical alliance”, *Christian Solidarity Worldwide*, 13/06/2019. Retrieved 18/06/2019, from <https://www.csw.org.uk/2019/6/13/press/4366/article.htm>.

<sup>31</sup> “Cuban Authorities Threaten a Baptist Pastor for Preaching Against the New Constitution”, *Translating Cuba*, 24/02/2019. Retrieved 18/06/2019, from <http://translatingcuba.com/cuban-authorities-threaten-a-baptist-pastor-for-preaching-against-the-new-constitution/>; “Several Opponents Arrested Protesting Against the New Constitution in Havana”, *Translating Cuba*, 24/02/2019. Retrieved 18/06/2019, from <https://translatingcuba.com/several-opponents-arrested-protesting-against-the-new-constitution-in-havana/>; “Pressure on church leaders remains high following referendum”, *Christian Solidarity Worldwide*, 28/02/2019. Retrieved 18/06/2019, from <https://www.csw.org.uk/2019/02/28/press/4235/article.htm>.

Venezuela” [<https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA07/20151106/104153/HHRG-114-FA07-Wstate-BarrosoT-20151106.pdf>] Accessed June 2019.

#### **A selection of international news outlets:**

- **Panam Post:** Religious persecution in Cuba intensified after agreement with Obama [<https://panampost.com/mamela-fiallo/2018/03/13/religious-persecution-in-cuba-intensified-after-agreement-with-obama/?cn-reloaded=1>] Accessed June 2019.
- **Friends in the West:** Baptist pastor arrested in Cuba ahead of Obama visit [<https://friendsinthewest.com/tag/revd-mario-felix-leonard-barroso/>] Accessed June 2019.
- **Miami Herald:** Dissident Cuban pastor says change is inevitable [<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/article1955445.html>] Accessed June 2019.

#### **A selection of Cuban outlets:**

- **Radio Televisión Martí:** Detención al pastor bautista Mario Félix Leonart previo a visita de Obama [Detention of Baptist pastor Mario Félix Leonart prior to Obama's visit] [<https://www.radiotelevisionmarti.com/a/117967.html>] Accessed June 2019.
- **14 y Medio:** Detenido el Pastor Mario Félix Leonart al salir de su casa en Villa Clara [Pastor Mario Félix Leonart was arrested after leaving his house in Villa Clara] [[https://www.14ymedio.com/nacional/detenciones\\_Mario\\_Felix\\_Leonart\\_Cuba\\_0\\_1\\_965403449.html](https://www.14ymedio.com/nacional/detenciones_Mario_Felix_Leonart_Cuba_0_1_965403449.html)] Accessed June 2019.
- **Cubanos por el Mundo:** Pastor bautista califica de secuestro su detención arbitraria en Cuba [Baptist pastor calls kidnapping his arbitrary detention in Cuba] [<https://cubanosporelmundo.com/2016/05/14/pastor-bautista-califica-de-secuestro-su-detencion-arbitraria-en-cuba/>] Accessed June 2019.

#### **A selection of international organizations:**

- **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom:** ‘2018 Annual Report’ April 2018 [[https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2\\_CUBA.pdf](https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Tier2_CUBA.pdf)] Accessed June 2019.

**Short summary:** Reverend Mario Felix Leonart Barroso, together with his wife, were victims of relentless harassment from the Cuban government. The communist regime sought to tighten its control over the activities of the pastor in order to eliminate any threat of social unrest. Because of the religious persecution he suffered, including house arrest, confiscation of property, surveillance, transit restrictions, threats, etc. he and his family had to leave the country. They were welcomed as refugees by the US government.

**Event:** Reverend Mario Felix Leonart Barroso is a member of the Baptist Convention of Western Cuba and founder and general coordinator of the Patmos Institute. Among the objectives of the institution are the exercise of interreligious dialogue, political advocacy, the specific monitoring and defense of religious freedoms and education in general of the fundamental human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration. Reverend Leonart advocates for freedom, denounces violations of religious freedoms and belief in Cuba, and supports the training of Cuban religious activists in the field of human rights. He frequently provides information on the state of religious freedom of the country to international



institutions such as the US Department of State. For this and other reasons, he has been harassed by the regime to the point of forcing him and his family to flee the country.

Reverend Lleonart has made the threats and difficulties he has suffered known through a written testimony submitted to the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere of the US House of Representatives for a hearing on “Deplorable Human Rights Violations in Cuba and Venezuela” in 2015. He has mentioned that he, his family, and his church have been prevented from traveling to urban communities, have been detained and taken to police stations on numerous occasions (or have been sanctioned with house arrest), and have also been targets of threats, coercion, blackmail, and warnings simply because they are members of the congregation. Additionally, they have been detained at the airport or interrogated upon arriving back on the island, and have had their individual items, property, and other personal effects confiscated.

Other sources, such as Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), have highlighted the case of the pastor in its annual report. They have reported that one of the most serious cases of religious persecution in 2016 was the arrest of Reverend Mario Felix Lleonart Barroso on 20 March, just hours before US President Barack Obama arrived in Cuba on an official visit. Rev Lleonart Barroso’s wife and two young daughters were placed under house arrest for 55 hours. Additionally, CSW stated that between January and July 2016 there were five occasions in which church leaders, and in some cases their families, had their belongings seized and meticulously examined. All five incidents involved Reverend Mario Felix Lleonart Barroso. Three of the incidents took place in June and July 2016. After an exhaustive examination of their luggage, items such as documents, religious materials, business cards of friends and contacts abroad, and personal laptops were seized. Rev. Lleonart Barroso’s personal belongings have not been returned, including the memory card from his mobile phone.

14 y Medio explained that this arrest was related to the statements made by the Reverend about the human rights crisis in Cuba, as well as his denunciations of the threats by which Cubans were warned not to mobilize freely during Obama’s visit to Cuba. Later, in May, as *Cubanos por el Mundo* informed, the pastor stated in an interview he was once again arrested. He indicated that paramilitary were directing the special troops who took him, his wife, and a human rights activist on the road from Santa Clara to Havana. The arrest took place at km 259 of the Central Highway from Havana to Santa Clara on May 13. He referred to this act as “kidnapping.” They were taken to the provincial unit of Special Troops, in the city of Santa Clara, and were held for four hours in a police car. The pastor and his wife were then returned to their home in the Camajuaní municipality.

As the pastor declared, after many hostilities and violence against him and his family, he had no choice but to flee the country alongside his family. He is currently living in the United States as a refugee, directing the institution from exile and waiting for the opportunity to return to his country without suffering the consequences or censorship of the communist regime.

### **Analysis:**

Cuba is the only communist country in Latin America. In April 2018, Miguel Diaz-Canel was elected President of Cuba, ending the long administration of the Castro family. The new president has stated more than once that he does not aim to change the core of the communist government; instead, he has declared that he will continue to defend the ideals of the Cuban

revolution.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the new Constitution—adopted after a questionable referendum<sup>33</sup>—contains language that proclaims the guiding role of the Communist Party in Cuban society and socialism as being irreversible.<sup>34</sup> Hence, there is a constitutional mandate to acquiesce every dimension of life in society under the postulates of the communist ideology, even the religious dimension must follow said “superior ruling force.” In that sense, any voice that contradicts or questions the communist ideology must be censored and repressed.

In this context, religion is seen as an authority “in competition,” in which religion affirms an authority that transcends that of the Cuban regime, representing a danger to its legitimacy, stability, and perpetuation in power. Religious leaders or Christian human rights activists, such as Reverend Leonart, are categorized as those who profess “anti-political” teachings or who can discourage citizens’ commitment to the “greatness of the Cuban revolution.” It is precisely because of the danger that religion represents for the Cuban regime that religious freedom is one of the most transgressed human rights on the island.

In its report on the Situation of Religious Freedom in Cuba, the Patmos Institute stated that during 2017, the communist government harassed religious minorities; interfered with religious celebrations; repressed associations that provide legal advice to churches, groups, or individuals regarding their rights; violated religious liberties in relation to political prisoners and/or of conscience; limited Internet access, hacked and carried on cyber-attacks to religious freedom activists; not to mention that many were prevented from leaving Cuba.<sup>35</sup>

The case of the Reverend Leonart, although it is one of the best known and documented, is not the only one. On many occasions, for fear of reprisals or for not having anyone to turn to—due to the corruption of the authorities or their loyalty to the regime—many Christians have no way of making public or denouncing the threats that they and their families are victims of.<sup>36</sup>

In any case, while it may seem that this situation will not change in the short term, it is important to note that during the referendum process for the approval of the new Constitution, some human rights groups, as well as religious leaders and religious groups, despite the fear of censorship and reprisals, challenged the regimen and openly expressed their opposition to certain contents of the Constitution. This kind of development is a sign that civil society is looking for ways to confront the discontent with the totalitarian regime and to ensure the protection of their human rights, even in a context as repressive as that of Cuba.

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<sup>32</sup> “Cuba’s new president vows to defend legacy of Castro revolution”, *Reuters*, 04/19/2018.

[<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cuba-politics/cubas-new-president-vows-to-defend-legacy-of-castro-revolution-idUSKBN1HQ1VV>] Accessed June 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Petri, D. & Pastor, J.A. “Cuba: New names, but the same approach”, *Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America*, 04/02/2018. [<https://platformforsocialtransformation.org/download/religiousfreedom/Petri-Pastor-Cuba-New-names-but-the-same-approach.pdf>] Accessed June 2019.

<sup>34</sup> “Cuban Constitution of 2019”, *Council on Hemispheric Affairs*, 04/11/2019. [<http://www.coha.org/cuban-constitution-of-2019/>] Accessed June 2019.

<sup>35</sup> “Religious Freedom in Cuba for Universal Periodic Review (2014-2017)”, *Patmos Institute Report*, 16/05/2019. [<https://institutopatmos.wordpress.com/2018/05/16/foropatmos-report-on-religious-freedom-in-cuba-english-version-for-universal-periodic-review-2014-2017-epu30-epucuba/>] Accessed June 2019.

<sup>36</sup> “Violent Incidents Database”, *Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America*.” [<http://violentincidents.plataformac.org/web/search/results?t=0&c=114&ini=2016-01-01&fin=2019-05-30&do=&pe=5%2C7&pc=>] Accessed June 2019.

### 3.3 Violent incidents of persecution against Christians in Cuba (2011-2018)

<b>Cuba</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2018</b>
Killings	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
(Attempts) to destroy Churches or Christian buildings	0	1	2	0	0	3	0	0
Closed Churches or Christian buildings	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Arrests	1	0	0	0	0	245	55	245
Sentences	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0
Abductions	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sexual Assaults	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Forced Marriages	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other forms of attack (physical or mental abuse)	1	1	11	0	0	0	67	1
Attacked Christian houses	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1
Attacked Christian shops or businesses	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Forced to leave Home	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Forced to leave Country	0	20	4	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Observatory of Religious Freedom in Latin America (2019). Violent Incidents Database, [www.violentincidents.com](http://www.violentincidents.com).