



OBSERVATORY OF
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
IN LATIN AMERICA

BIANNUAL REPORT

PERIOD:
JANUARY - JUNE 2022

About us

The Observatory of Religious Freedom - OLIRE is an investigation, training, and advocacy program monitoring and documenting the state of religious freedom in Latin America. We offer a space for the understanding and promotion of religious freedom from an academic, non-confessional, and non-partisan perspective, which enables the strengthening of research on religious freedom and violations of this right in the region.

According to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights General Comment No. 22 of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (and Article 12 of the American Convention on Human Rights), at OLIRE, we consider religious freedom as a broad and multidimensional concept that requires to be protected in all spheres of society.

Religious freedom lies at the intersection of many fundamental rights, including freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, and freedom of assembly. Religious freedom is far more than the freedom to worship; it involves the freedom to live and express one's religion at an individual and collective level in the

family, school, business, and cultural spheres. Consequently, we perceive restrictions on religious expression in any sphere of society, whether caused by state or non-state actors, as restrictions on religious freedom.

We consider religious freedom an essential feature of a healthy and vibrant democracy. Promoting religious freedom is, therefore, part of the necessary efforts to improve and deepen the quality of democracy. In recent years, Latin American societies have come a long way in this area, but challenges persist, mainly related to the application of religious freedom in some areas.

We adhere to the principle of separation of religion and State. However, we also believe that religious individuals and organizations have the right to participate actively in public debate without any restrictions, like any other civil society organization, as long as they do not seek to impose their views on the rest of society. State institutions should not be subordinated to religious institutions, nor vice versa.



➤ Areas of work

MONITOR:

We document, research, and analyze the state of religious freedom and its possible limitations throughout the States of the region. The position and vulnerability of religious minorities whose rights are being violated.

EMPOWER:

We train citizens, political actors, and international institutions on the right to religious freedom and the extent of hostilities and violations of said right in Latin America.

INFLUENCE:

Our objective is to participate and actively influence the social and public sphere on a national and multilateral level, to improve the protection of the right to religious freedom.



Latin America: the state of religious freedom – January - June 2022

This document aims to present a general picture of the challenges and difficulties faced by religious communities in the region, based mainly on the data obtained through our reporting tool: *Violent Incidents Database-VID*. The analysis will consider the conditions that have affected the enjoyment and exercise of the right to religious freedom in the following aspects or categories studied by OLIRE:

1. Regulation of religion by organized crime

As noted in our previous reports, the de facto power exercised by criminal group leaders leads to the implementation of an organized structure that operates in society, in which the government and state security forces have little or no interference. This situation means that local governments often have to negotiate with criminal groups to carry out essential social assistance functions and - in some cases - are even forced to pay quotas to enter particular areas. In other cases, given the high level of corruption in Latin American governments - it is the same authorities who, in collusion with these criminal groups, enable the continuation of their illegal activities.

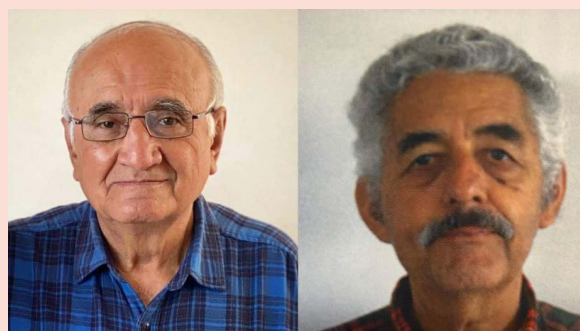
Diversification and the desire for greater profits by the different criminal groups operating in certain areas have led to disputes over control of territories, transport routes, distribution, suppliers, and collaborators. Depending on the country, the locations may be more attractive due to the territory's geography, transportation facilities, collusion with the authorities, and borders with other areas of interest. On the other hand, among the disputed activities, we can mention actions linked to drug trafficking or human trafficking, recruitment of minors, installation of antipersonnel mines, threats to leaders and communities, selective assassinations, displacements, confinement, and sexual abuse.

Source: "Neither the Christ was saved from the narco's machine gun", *Noticias Telemundo*.

In these confrontations, they seek to determine which of the active criminal groups has more power and authority in a given territory, causing a high level of insecurity that often motivates the massive displacement of families and entire communities due to the direct or indirect threats suffered. Not to mention that during the COVID-19 context, criminal groups took advantage of the social and mobility restrictions to diversify their activities and empower themselves in the different zones they operate in, sometimes assuming the role of benefactors providing basic necessities to the sectors of the population with the most significant economic need, to gain their loyalty.

As a common practice, in these contexts, the authorities have entrusted State security to the armed forces through strategies or public policies that have given a greater scope of action to the military or special groups within

the national police. Despite these measures to reduce violence, the level of insecurity and criminality has increased, coupled with the number of violations of citizens' human rights. This situation results in the re-victimization of a society trying to free itself from violence. In specific contexts, incidents have been reported as a result of abuses by the national police and military in cases of disproportionate use of public force in some social mobilizations and the practice of "false positive" arrests.



Source: "Fathers Javier Campos Morales and Joaquín César Mora, murdered by organized crime in Chihuahua, Mexico". Twitter @JesuitsGlobal

In Colombia, mainly due to the increase of violence during the electoral period, congregations, churches, national faith communities, and international solidarity networks are constantly speaking out against the serious events that indigenous, Afro-descendant, and peasant communities are suffering due to the armed conflict. However, the authorities' response to the events denounced by religious communities is still deficient. Similarly, in Mexico, religious communities' pastoral and humanitarian activity is perceived as a threat to the territorial domain exercised by criminal groups. Their reaction is an outrage against religious leaders and human rights activists who call for an end to violence.

Despite the evident situation of vulnerability of ministers of worship and active members of their religious communities, the corrupt ties between criminals and public officials are so close that, regardless of the public accusations filed against them, the perpetrators continue to act with impunity to this day. It is important to mention that, even at the highest levels of state administration, there is a lack of interest and empathy in responding to the call for action made by religious communities at risk and have been victims of this kind of situation. In a similar context, both in Honduras and El Salvador, religious and lay representatives have been the victims of threats and attacks due to their defense of human rights and denunciation of social violence and abuse of power exercised over the most vulnerable sectors of the population, especially indigenous communities. The ongoing public appeal in favor of the most defenseless has placed them at risk, mainly when they are seen as an obstacle for criminal activities to continue before the absent - and sometimes complicit - gaze of the authorities.

On the other hand, the economic and humanitarian crisis, the increase in the population living in extreme poverty, the uncontrolled migration, and truancy as a result of the pandemic have also influenced the number of young people enlisted in criminal groups, either by necessity or because they are forcibly recruited. In this context, the educational programs of the different faith communities that aim to keep young people away from violence and drugs are constantly under attack, as the development of such activities threatens the stability of the criminal group in the area and the possibility of having more followers. In addition, the religious leaders in charge of these social programs are victims of threats and extortion attempts against them and their children, who also become affected as a way to intimidate their parents into abandoning their religious activities in areas dominated by criminal groups.



Source: "Father José Guadalupe Rivas, found dead in Tecate, Baja California, Mexico", *El Universal*.

In this context, religious leaders are often subjected to defamation, extortion, kidnapping, and death threats. In many cases, these incidents lead to the total or partial cancellation of worship activities or limitations relating to specific worship times. For example, many churches in rural areas have changed their service schedule to enable parishioners to attend their worship services without risking their security or because the dominant criminal group in that area only allows them to carry out religious activities at specific times. Thus, in these circumstances, it is common for these groups to impose an unofficial curfew as a mandatory period in which no one from the community can be out of the house after a particular time at night.

In addition, in many countries of the region, robberies of parishes and other places of worship are frequent, substantial, and even violent as another way of obtaining economic income to finance illegal activities and as a form of reprisal and intimidation of religious leaders and the communities they represent. In this sense, criminal groups continue to destroy and steal not only goods or images of high economic value but also donations and contributions collected to meet some of the needs of both the religious denomination in question and the communities of which they are a part. In the process, desecrations of images or objects of deep symbolic/religious value for the parishioners are common, even if they have no economic value, and with the sole purpose of damaging the religious feelings

of the community to demonstrate who holds power in the locality. This type of violent event occurs even during religious celebrations, placing the integrity of the attendees at risk. Although communities and religious leaders make efforts and calls to the authorities to pay attention to this problem, when the officers have responded, they have been insufficient and, in the best of cases, ineffective. The work of religious groups focused on humanitarian assistance to mitigate the pandemic's ravages, and the economic crisis is at constant risk due to criminal responses such as robberies or armed attacks. Not to mention that, in many cases, religious leaders require the permission of the leaders of cartels, gangs, or guerrillas to perform their activities within certain areas of the country.

In this context, the right to religious freedom faces limitations, particularly in its collective dimension, since the surrounding violence and insecurity impede the whole exercise of rights such as worshipping or gathering related to religion or belief, establishing and maintaining premises for these purposes, teaching a particular religion, and even celebrating religious festivals or rites. Not to mention the limitations to the right to security and integrity suffered by those looking to stop this situation by taking actions inspired by their religious beliefs, particularly when criminal groups consider them as obstacles that must be eradicated or at least controlled by any means possible.



Source: "Demonstrators carry a sign reading 'Justice' during a march against President Daniel Ortega", La Voz de América.

2. Religious restrictions motivated by an antireligious political ideology (communism) and by the totalitarian control of the government

Although the situation in countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela only worsened with the crisis as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, that situation was the pretext for tightening restrictive measures against dissident voices and attempting to subject religious groups to the political line of the different regimes in each country. Thus, the social restrictions in governments with respect for the rule of law could be legitimate and justified up to certain limits in the mentioned countries were taken as an excuse to intensify hostility against those considered opponents. The exacerbated abuse of power has been a sign of the communist inspiration of authoritarian governments and has also resulted in the progressive abandonment of guarantees of citizens' human rights.

While the government gradually lifted the social and mobility restrictions, this situation has continued over time. Following the growing criticism of the abandonment of democratic practices and the repression of dissident voices,

there has been an attempt to manipulate the religious discourse and references to gain legitimacy among the population. They have defamed religious leaders considered "enemies of the government," organized -without authority- religious celebrations, and approached some religious leaders (motivated by their own will or fear) to show apparent respect for religious beliefs.

However, there are many more religious leaders who reject the attempts to perpetuate in power. Some religious groups have even built an interdenominational unity and firmly defended their convictions. All this while facing the risks involved in confronting State power, which also has supporters among citizens, as well as para-state groups that serve the regime. It is worth to mention that, although religious groups and religious leaders coexist in this special vulnerability and circumstances, new voices keep emerging to denounce the abuses committed by the regime, motivated by different religious convictions.



Source: "Managua Archdiocese condemns repression against San Miguel Arcangel Church in Masaya", La Lupa.



In the specific case of Cuba, more than six decades of communist dictatorship and the worsening of the crisis in the country have motivated continuous (peaceful) social protests demanding a radical change in the government and the return to democratic practices. The aim is to recover the opening to the world and the market in order to improve citizens' quality of life. Religious communities, being part of the social groups that raise their voices against the injustices of the regime, their leaders and congregants have been constantly targeted in an attempt to silence any dissenting voice, even those motivated by the doctrine of faith they profess. Any critic of the "socialist revolution" is considered an enemy of the government and presented as a traitor to the population, including religious and secular leaders who are committed to denouncing human rights violations and urgently calling for better practices to guarantee the right to religious freedom at both the individual and collective levels: the right to manifest one's faith without fear of state sanction, right to preach and spread the doctrine of faith without fear of being considered a criticism of communist postulates, right to obtain the legal status that allows it to operate regularly in the country, right to construct and renovate buildings used for worship purposes, right to constitute organizations that contribute to the objectives of the religious community, right to exercise leadership of a faith community without being targeted by hostilities, among others.

Although hostile actions against religious leaders and their communities have persisted since Castro's arrival to power, they have intensified over time, as well as the risk of being treated as an enemy when someone acts according to its faith if it is considered a threat to the interests of the regime. Since the Communist Party controls all spheres of the State apparatus, it is through the Office of Attention to Religious Affairs (ORA) that the attempts of coercion and actions against those who - among the religious groups - are pointed out as opponents or dissidents are materialized. These may range from: threats of eviction of protest demonstrators, unannounced cancellation of religious activities, closing of churches (including those operating inside private homes) and confiscation of property, and unjustified arrest of religious leaders and activists for supporting demonstrators or being part of protests, forfeiture of imported goods, impediment of entry or exit from the country, acts of repudiation (including physical violence) and/or vandalism against places of worship, defamation campaigns perpetrated by the authorities, unfounded and arbitrary police summonses, harassment at work and closing of private businesses, and permanent surveillance by the police and members of the community. It is worth noting that only those religious communities affiliated with the ORA enjoy minimal freedoms as long as they are loyal to the regime.

On the other hand, in Venezuela, in the country's most critical moments of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were no evident signs of hostility towards religious groups because the government tried to give itself credit for the humanitarian work carried out by them. That changed as soon as the electoral campaign to determine who would be the local authorities began. There was an attempt to silence religious groups when they denounced the lack of transparency in the process, the corruption of officials, and the need to stop the abuse of human rights to restore democratic life in the country. In that sense, after the November 2021 elections, intimidating actions against religious groups have continued as they resume representing a voice of authority in society. Their welfare work preventing the neediest from being dependent on the government is seen as an element that undermines the unconditional loyalty of citizens to the regime. Despite this, some religious groups - not representative at the social level - seek alliances with the government in exchange for economic or administrative favors.

Likewise, the situation in Nicaragua has become much more worrisome. Both independent civil society organizations at the national level and international human rights organizations have spoken out on behalf of the Ortega regime victims, including religious groups (especially the Catholic Church and some evangelical denominations). Throughout this year and after the controversial electoral victory in November 2021, in which - despite high absenteeism rates - the Ortega-Murillo duo was proclaimed the winner, harassment against religious leaders denouncing abuses of power, corruption of officials, the lack of human rights guarantees, and the absence of democratic practices in the country, has increased dramatically. Intimidating actions against religious groups, although they mainly target religious leaders and ministers, also reach parishioners who publicly defend them or listen to their message. In this context, following a redesign of the legal framework that attempts to give legality to repression, defamation campaigns against

religious groups have become more frequent: defamation campaigns against leaders who speak out in favor of the population and carry out social work; death or kidnapping threats that have even motivated the granting of precautionary measures by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights - IACHR, unjustified expulsion and the impediment of entry/exit to ministers of worship; the closing and expropriation of property of institutions and organizations of the Church; the attempted arbitrary arrest of religious leaders; the threat of loss of legal status and/or the suspension of administrative procedures initiated by religious groups considered opponents; the extreme surveillance of religious leaders, their family members and lay people close to them; the police siege of religious buildings and temples that have even prevented parishioners from entering the aforementioned buildings and/or the celebration of worship activities.

Moreover, the government does not cease to intimidate members of religious groups who, without holding representative positions, are targeted as “enemies of the government” and harassed by their communities, paramilitary groups, and local police because they belong to a specific religious community and because of their closeness to its leaders. It is also important to highlight that even when the government does not cease in its strategy of intimidation towards religious communities, it also tries to appear close to them by organizing its own religious festivities, trying to delegitimize the ecclesiastical authority of the leaders of some communities and promoting an attitude of acceptance and tolerance only towards those religious leaders who are not considered to be opponents. They manipulate religious references in their favor to restrain citizen discontent against them.

As part of this severe hostility, religious leaders openly critical of the regime continue to be monitored. Preaching or teaching inside and outside the Church is monitored by the national police and sympathizers of the government. All this in order for the State to be the only voice of authority, also subrogating the right/duty of parents to educate their children, since part of the objectives of the educational system at the national level, include the indoctrination of children and adolescents under the ideological guidelines of the political party in power, of clear communist inspiration. Thus, parents who express their disagreement or denounce cases of discrimination either by teachers or peers against their children because of the

faith they profess, are threatened and silenced, not only at the community level, but also at the workplace. Similarly, teachers - like other state workers - are forced to participate in the political activities of the governments in power, even when this contradicts their beliefs, under threat of being suspended or fired.

Finally, we can also mention the cases of Honduras and El Salvador as scenarios of constant monitoring in the region. There is the possibility of danger to the development and continuity of religious activities when hostility is perceived on the part of the government, themselves, or as a result of illegal alliances with criminal groups at certain levels of the state structure. Thus, concerning Honduras, although with the previous administration, there were already some intolerant actions against religious leaders (mainly evangelicals) who were not part of the president's close circle and were critical of him. With the new administration, there are signs of harassment against those who were part of that circle. They have been stigmatized by society and some public officials due to the high levels of corruption experienced in the previous government administration. On the other hand, in El Salvador, although the president is very fond of invoking religious references, some religious leaders denounce that when they are critical of his policies due to the insufficient guarantee of human rights and the possibility of worsening the economic situation of the country, they have experienced hostilities, especially at the administrative level.



Source: “Cuban demonstrations, in images”, *Diario El Correo*.



Source: "Demonstrators during a march for the Secular State", Aletheia.

3. Hostility towards religious expressions by state and non-state actors

The participation and influence of the religious sector in the public sphere is not much questioned -except in dictatorial governments- when it is involved in peace processes, defense of human rights, or humanitarian assistance. In other scenarios, under an erroneous interpretation of the principle of Church-State separation, the defense of expressions of faith in the public sphere is criticized and even censored, especially when defending religious doctrine regarding the defense of life and marriage and when it substantially contradicts some ideologies promoted by groups considered vulnerable minorities. In this situation, the defense of faith-based positions is qualified as intolerant, retrograde, archaic, and discriminatory, among other adjectives, because it does not coincide with the line of thought adopted by particular social groups.

When such cases arise, the correlation between the right to religious freedom and the right to freedom of expression is directly violated by

social and governmental attempts to limit or censor expressions of faith and the defense of religious doctrine in the public sphere.

Hence, with different nuances and intensities among Latin American countries, it is common to identify attempts to censor the perspectives of confessional actors and anti-discrimination norms that represent a threat to the free expression of religious faith, particularly when the content contradicts or criticizes abortion, sexual diversity, gender identity, same-sex marriage, among others. Specifically, the self-censorship phenomenon has been identified, in the case of Christians, as a consequence of the "chilling effect" on work and political life. This phenomenon occurs when people cannot or do not feel free to openly express their faith, convictions, or views on their beliefs due to fear of sanctions from laws and policies that indirectly reduce freedom of religious expression if it goes against the prevailing culture.

Although there is a limitation on the expression of opinions based on the faith of Christians in Latin America, it is also important to recognize their counterpart: Christians who are intolerant of other positions or beliefs and take their faith as a premise end up stigmatizing or discriminating other groups. It is necessary to evaluate each specific case.


Another critical aspect continues to be the indiscriminate use of social networks as a mechanism to attack confessional points of view, given the ease and speed with which people can express an opinion almost anonymously.

In strict terms, these manifestations of intolerance can range from constant criticism for defending certain principles of faith, bullying at work, pressure to receive training and promote an ideology contrary to the belief

one professes, the impediment to expressing opinions or participating in public events because the postulates of faith are considered harmful, limitations to exercise the right to conscientious objection (especially in the medical and educational fields), impediments to educate and transmit to one's children the religious convictions and beliefs of their parents, the accusation of discrimination against businessmen, ministers of worship and parents who are not willing to promote with their acts the postulates of the LGTB community, the monitoring and surveillance of religious leaders and their teachings to subsequently accuse them of promoting "hate speech", the restrictions imposed on religious institutions (including hospitals and schools) to prevent the promotion of a culture in accordance with their religious ethos, among others.



Source: "Woman vandalizes access to an evangelical temple in the city of Lujan, Argentina", Infobae.



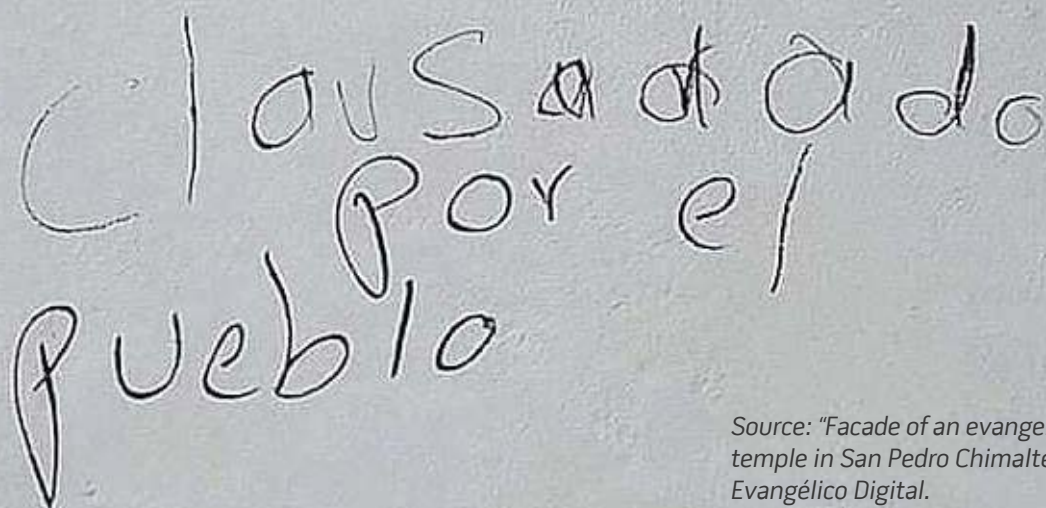
Source: "Conscientious objection for doctors, once again under debate", Revista Proceso.

However, these pressure actions are not the only manifestations of hostility towards religious expressions, as signs of violence perpetrated in this context are increasingly frequent. For example, attacks on places of worship have become a recurrent activity on the part of radical feminist groups in the framework of International Women's Day celebrations, as has happened in Argentina, Colombia, Chile, Bolivia, and Mexico. The above is under the premise that religion is considered an enemy of women's rights and that the Church is a historically oppressive institution. Therefore, attacking temples turns out to be a means to do justice on their own, call the authorities attention, motivate others to carry out similar actions, and intimidate the Church.

Another constant related to what was mentioned in the previous paragraph is the attack on places of worship as a form of social and political protest. In Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru, there have been vandalism actions and more severe damages against religious buildings as part of social and political demonstrations that do not directly target the Church. However, the Church is attacked because it represents an institution with historical roots. Therefore, it is part of the status quo intended to be revoked to enforce social requests to the authorities and part of the solution to eradicate structural inequalities and paradigms in today's society.

In both cases, the scope of these attacks is not limited to the material damage caused but sometimes also prevents the continuity of religious activities and generates insecurity and risk of remaining in a place of worship when protest or social demonstration is constantly carried out.

Special mention should be made of the Mexican case, in which, as a consequence of a radical and mistaken interpretation of the concept of the secular state, there has been an attempt at the legislative and intersectoral public policy level to prevent religious communities from having a presence in the public life of the country, as it is considered an illegitimate interference in the political agenda and therefore, an action sanctioned by the current legal system. The country recently presented a concrete example of this restrictive regulation model. Two Cardinals were sanctioned by the Electoral Tribunal of the Judiciary of the Federation because during the electoral campaign, as part of their preaching in religious services, they promoted among the parishioners the responsible vote in favor of those candidates who support their religious values and watch over the common good. In other words, religious leaders were convicted because, as part of their pastoral work, they encouraged others to act in coherence with their faith and seek social welfare in exercising their right to vote.



Clausurado
por el
pueblo

Source: "Facade of an evangelical temple in San Pedro Chimaltepec",
Evangélico Digital.

4. Hostility towards religious conversion in indigenous communities

Given that the cosmovision of indigenous communities governs every aspect of their lives and their relationship with other community members and the world, it is essential to emphasize that it is a fundamental element in forming the identity of its members. It also reaches political, economic, and cultural aspects, including the relationship with the environment and religion. In this context, religious practices not only shape one's own identity but are also an indicator of cohesion and belonging to the community, forming a bond that is even more valuable than the blood tie. And consequently, whoever departs from the religious rites of the community (of syncretic or ancestral tendency) is considered a brought to the group and, therefore, no longer being a member of the community: loses any right, power, or freedom and becomes a victim of hostilities, as a punishment for his desertion.

In Latin America, many indigenous communities exist in most of the region's countries. However, not all of them have reported concrete incidents when an indigenous member abandons the community's religious practice and converts to another rite when affiliating to a new religion. Thus, Colombia and Mexico continue to be the most

representative countries with respect to this type of cases in which conversion -mainly to Christianity- is rejected by the members and ethnic leaders and is sanctioned by them through different actions: loss of community rights (including registration in the state census); pressure to be part of religious rites; fines for not being part of religious rites; prevention from entering/leaving the community; imprisonment of converts and their families; prohibition to enroll the children of converts in public schools; pressure to unite converts or their children in marriage with ethnic leaders; expulsion from the communities; physical violence against converts and their families; exclusion from benefits granted by the State; impediment to transmit or talk about their faith even in the family environment; destruction of converts' homes; arbitrary detention in community jails; and sometimes, prosecution by ethnic leaders together with episodes of physical violence, among others. All these hostile actions against converts prevent them from continuing with the faith practices of the religious community they joined and, through intimidation and defamation, to avoid new similar cases from occurring in the community.



Source: "The Corima Tarahumara. Experience of an indigenous community in Mexico", Congregación de la Misión.

It is important to add that syncretic practices in many indigenous communities are often related to the influence of the Catholic religion. Those who promote attacks on converts do so because it is a way of defending their doctrine. However, the Catholic Church sometimes does not endorse the mixture of ancestral and Catholic rites. However, from the follow-up of this type of case, the vast majority of hostilities against converts are not promoted by the Church they claim to represent but respond to individual motivations or to a misunderstanding of the faith they claim to profess.

In this context, the cultural and geographic barrier to accessing the reality of indigenous communities is still a great challenge for society and the State. On some occasions, the lack of clarity in the development of events and their relationship with personal and political conflicts have been the apparent justification by the authorities for not providing a timely and efficient response to safeguard the religious freedom of converts, especially in the aspect of their free choice to profess a different faith and exercise it without the risk of coercion. In addition, the apparent defense of "indigenous autonomy" and their regulation

according to the "uses and customs" of each community has also been a recurrent excuse for not carrying out actions for the victims of religious intolerance, to prevent actions in the face of the severe violation of human rights they have experienced. Forced displacement for religious reasons is one of the most severe consequences. It not only implies the uprooting of the converts and their family from their community (considering its meaning in the indigenous cosmovision) but also the beginning of a whole cycle of violations of fundamental rights, such as the right to life, personal integrity, freedom of movement, personal safety, housing, work, health, food, among others.

In any case, recognizing religious intolerance as one of the causes will help to design and implement strategies that address the causes of the problem and, in the best of cases, to implement preventive measures that protect the right to religious freedom of the members of the reservations or indigenous communities, respecting, as far as possible, their customs and traditions, following the human rights of all the population.



Violent Incidents Database (VID)

OLIRE's main activity is monitoring the state of religious freedom in the region, which can be divided into two main areas: *physical violence and pressure (non-physical violence)*.

The tool used by OLIRE to document these incidents is the **Violent Incidents Database-VID**, following specific **reference criteria**.¹

The VID is designed to collect, record and analyze incidents related to violations of religious freedom following an already defined conceptual framework. Through research conducted by OLIRE and information provided by collaborators in the region, this tool aims not only to estimate the number of incidents against religious leaders or communities but also to be a source of information on the type and/or characteristics of this problem.

It is important to note that the VID is not presented as an exhaustive list. Many incidents are never made public and therefore cannot be included. On the other hand, on some occasions, media reports of incidents may be incorrect. While it is impossible to verify all incidents listed, when reports are flagged as false or inaccurate, the corresponding entries are modified or deleted. As this database is constantly updated, we will likely include newly reported cases later.

For illustrative purposes, here is a limited list of some of the incidents reported and identified by OLIRE in the period January to June 2022:

¹ It is important to note that the Observatory team does not have the resources to validate each reported incident. If, after entering an incident, users or our collaborators detect that the information provided is not entirely correct or is incomplete, it may be deleted and/or modified.

I. Forms of physical violence

These are those violent actions that risk the human security of confessional actors, religious communities, and their members, either through physical abuse, kidnappings, murders, or robberies. Likewise, they may affect places of worship and other properties (businesses, residences) through vandalism or others.



- June 2022, Province of San Luis. The catholic temples of the Cathedral, Iglesia Santo Domingo, and the evangelical temple Iglesia Universal del Reino de Dios, all in the city of Salta, were **vandalized** by radical feminists during the march "Ni una menos" (Not woman less).
- April 2022, Buenos Aires, Federal Capital. Annunciation Cathedral of the Russian Orthodox Church in Buenos Aires was **vandalized** with graffiti on its walls.
- March 2022, Province of Buenos Aires. The **evangelical temple's** entrance in Luján was vandalized during the demonstrations on March 8 (International Women's Day). The following phrase was spray-painted: "Con tus hijos nos metemos" (We mess with your children).

- March 2022, Jujuy Province. Five Catholic shrines known as "Paseo del Peregrino" (Pilgrim's Walk) in Río Blanco were **vandalized** by unknown persons who destroyed images of saints.
- March 2022, Santiago del Estero Province. Priest Rubén Lassaga, the parish priest in the department of Pellegrini in Santiago del Estero, received **threats** for his work with families affected by deforestation.



Source: "Access to the vandalized Evangelical Temple of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God in the city of Lujan, Argentina", Infobae.



- On April 2022, Santa Cruz de la Sierra. Friar Wilberth Daza Rodas was **murdered** by criminals inside the Convent of San Francisco de Santa Cruz during a robbery.
- On March 8, 2022, La Paz (capital city) and Cercado Province. During the International Women's Day march, radical feminist demonstrators **vandalized** the Basilica of Maria Auxiliadora and the Divina Providencia parish in Cochabamba.



Source: "Friar Wilberth Daza, murdered in the convent of San Francisco in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia." Editorial La Patria.



- June 2022, Minas Gerais. The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Mercy in Minas Gerais was **vandalized** by unknown persons who intimidated the workers and damaged the bathrooms provided for the use of pilgrims.

- May 2022, Amazonas. Pastor David Miranda Neto of the Deus é Amor church received a **threat** via social networks, warning him that if he visited the city of Manaus, "it would your end."

- February 2022, Paraná. Activists of leftist parties **interrupted** the mass celebration in the Church of Our Lady of the Rosary in Curitiba, shouting political slogans and insulting those present.



- March 2022, Metropolitan Region. The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes in Santiago de Chile was **vandalized** by the theft of two ciboria and the desecration of the tabernacle.
- February 2022, Valparaíso. Chapel of the Holy Family in Cerro Placeres, the city of Valparaíso, was **vandalized** by the theft of liturgical elements.



Source: "Councilman Renato Freitas during a demonstration on February 5 at the Rosary Church in Curitiba, Brazil". Crux Media.



- May 2022, Department of Antioquia. Evangelical pastor Miguel Alfonso Sierra was **found** dead inside a vehicle in Bello in Antioquia. It is presumed that the perpetrators are part of criminal groups operating in the area.
- April 2022, Province of Atlántico. Criminals entered the Church of Santa Ana in Boyacá, causing damage and **desecrating** the tabernacle to take the ciboria and the chalice.
- March 2022, Bogota, Capital City. Hooded women and men **entered** the Primate Cathedral of Bogota during a mass celebration, shouting slogans and harangues against the parishioners.

- January 2022, Buenaventura District. The Bishop of Buenaventura, Rubén Jaramillo, received **death threats** from criminal groups, which have prevented him from going to the communities where he carries out his ministry.



Source: "Hooded men burst into the cathedral of Bogota and shout harangues to the congregation". Celam Press.



- April 2022, Santiago de Cuba. Pastor Lorenzo Rosales Fajardo of the Monte de Sion Church in Palma Soriano was **sentenced** to eight years in prison for incitement to hatred and public disorder.
- March 2022. Pastor Carlos Sebastián Hernández, secretary of the Cuban Baptist Convention, **flew out** of the country with his two sons, fearing for the physical integrity of his family.

- February 2022, La Habana. Police **arrested** the president of the Reformed Church of Cuba, Reverend Yordanys Díaz Arteaga, after searching his home and confiscating equipment belonging to the Church and cell phones, and others.
- January 2022, Camagüey Province. Government sympathizers **vandalized** the house where priest Rolando Motes de Oca lives. They threw eggs at the facade of the house.



Source: "Pastor Carlos Sebastián Hernández flees Cuba with his two sons". Radio Televisión Martí.



- May 2022, Izabal Region. Mayan spiritual leader Adela Choc Cuz and her daughter were **kidnapped**, assaulted, and stripped of their property after being accused of practicing witchcraft.



Source: "Adela Choc Moc, spiritual leader of Chichipate village accused of witchcraft". IM-Defensoras.



- May 2022, Port-au-Prince. Armed men **kidnapped** several people near Croix-des-Bouquets, among whom was the priest Whatner Aupont, priest of St. Joseph the Worker Church in Grand' Ravine.
- June 2022, Port-au-Prince. Sister Luisa Dell'Orto, a Catholic nun and director of the "Casa Carlo" home for street children, was **murdered** by armed men during a robbery in Port-au-Prince.
- June 2022, Port-au-Prince. Members of a criminal gang **kidnapped** Christian missionary Esteban Zambrano, when he arrived home in Port-au-Prince. The criminals demanded a high sum of money for his release.



Source: "Sister Luisa Dell'Orto, director of the children's home 'Casa Carlo', murdered during robbery in Port-au-Prince". OMP Venezuela.



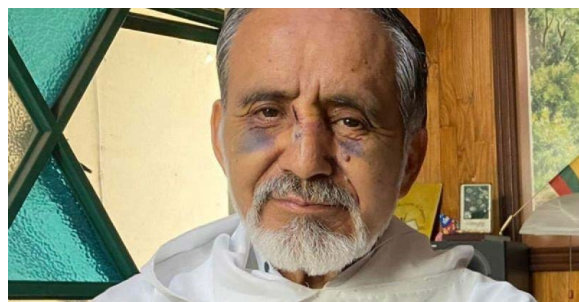
- March 2022, Valle de Sula. Priest José Enrique Vásquez was on his way to San Pedro Sula when he was approached by unknown persons who forced him out of the car and **shot him** in the head.



Source: "Burial of Father Enrique Vásquez, murdered in Santa Cruz de Yojoa, Honduras". Tunota.com



- June 2022, Chihuahua. The sisters who work at a school in Cerocahui, in the Sierra, denounce receiving **death threats** and rape threats from drug traffickers.
- June 2022, Michoacán. Sicarios **intercept** and beat priest Mateo Calvillo Paz, director of the Radio and Television Evangelization Commission of the Archdiocese of Morelia.
- June 2022, Chihuahua. Jesuit priests Javier Campos Morales and Joaquín César Mora, who served in the community of Cerocahui, were **murdered** by a sicario while protecting a young man who sought refuge in the Church.
- June 2022, Jalisco. Monsignor Rafael Sandoval was **intercepted** by criminal groups while carrying out his pastoral activities. They stole the van he was traveling in and left him abandoned on the highway.
- May 2022, Baja California. Father José Guadalupe Rivas, director of the Casa del Migrante in Tecate, was **found** dead with injuries to his head. It is presumed that he was a victim of organized crime.
- March 2022, Chiapas. Father Matías Rodríguez Jiménez, the parish priest in San Cristóbal de las Casas, capital of the State of Chiapas, was **intercepted** by armed men while he was driving. After hitting his car, they threatened him, saying, "we know who you are and what you do, be careful!"
- March 2022, states of Veracruz and Guadalajara. Protesters **vandalized** the doors of the Beaterio del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús in Xalapa and the **exterior** of the Sanctuary of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, during the march for Women's Day.
- March 2022, Puebla. Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses church were victims of an **assault** by armed men during a celebration.
- January 2022, Oaxaca. In the town of San Juan Mazatlán Mixe, 15 evangelical members of six different families were **arrested** and fined for not funding the Catholic festivities of December 18.



Source: "Father Mateo Calvillo, head of the Commission for Media Evangelization of the Archdiocese of Morelia, beaten by sicarios in Querétaro, Mexico". Revista Proceso.





- June 2022, Boaco and Granada departments. Recently, the government has arrested religious leaders on charges such as **sexual abuse** and **physical and psychological injuries**. Civil society organizations and religious communities state that these may be fabricated charges.
- June 2022, Chinandega. Unknown people **vandalized** and profaned the San Pedro del Norte temple, stealing the tabernacle, the ciboria, and the chalice inside.
- June 2022, Grenada. The government **expelled** the Sisters of Charity from the country through police and immigration agents, who broke into the residences to take them on a bus to the Costa Rica border.

- May 2022, Masaya. The parish priest Harving Padilla of the San Juan Bautista Church is under **surveillance** and prevented from leaving the parish house by police officers stationed in the surroundings of the Church.
- March 2022, Managua. Apostolic Nuncio, Mons. Waldemar Stanislaw Sommertag **left the country** immediately after the withdrawal of the government's approval for the representative of the Holy See.



Source: "Sisters expelled from Nicaragua arriving to Costa Rica." Zenit.



- April 2022, Lima. Criminals **vandalized** and destroyed the interior of the Concepción church during a citizens' march.
- March 2022, Callao. Priest Andres Cantos, superior of the Truth Cooperators Congregation, denounced that extortionists **threatened** to destroy and steal the materials to build a school in La Perla if they did not accept his demands.



Source: "Father Andres Cantos, denounces threat of extortionists for construction of school in the community of La Perla." El Comercio.

Table 1: **Violent Incidents in Latin America** (January - June 2022)

Country	Murders	Destruction or attempted destruction of churches or Christian buildings or Closed places of worship or religious buildings	Sentences	Arrests/ detentions	Abductions	Other physical attacks/ Death threats	Forced to leave the country
Argentina	0	22	0	0	0	1	0
Bolivia	1	3	0	0	0	1	0
Chile	0	3	0	0	0	0	0
Colombia	0	2	0	0	0	1	0
Cuba	0	1	0	5	0	0	3
El Salvador	3	3	0	0	2	10	4
Haiti	1	0	0	0	2	0	4
Honduras	6	1	0	0	0	0	0
Mexico	4	8	4	0	0	11	0
Nicaragua	0	7	1	2	0	4	0

Source: OLIRE, Violent Incidents Database – VID.

The updating of this database is continuous, so the number of incidents may vary as new cases are registered/identified.

To view the updated data, [enter here](#)

The data presented in this section have been obtained with the collaboration of the Latin America Research Unit of Open Doors International.

II. The second area of research

Corresponds to the monitoring and subsequent analysis of other forms of pressure (*non-physical violence*) such as discrimination, social exclusion, and hostility.



- February 2022, Department of Chocó. Juan Carlos Barreto, Bishop of Quibdó, **denounced** being pressured by authorities of the joint task forces in the area to deny his denunciation of complicity between the military and organized crime in the conflict zone.
- February 2022, Bogotá, the capital city. Faced with the complaint of a member of the Adventist Church for not acting as a juror during an election held on a Saturday (day of rest), the Court considered that the person was **obliged** to attend because the right to religious freedom is not considered an absolute right.



Source: "Bishop of Quibdó confirms pressure from the Army after denouncing alliance between public forces and the Clan del Golfo". *Prensa Celam*.



- April 2022, Metropolitan Region. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights **condemned** the State of Chile for alleged discriminatory treatment of Sandra Pavez. Her certificate of suitability to teach religion was revoked by the Bishopric of San Bernardo after it became known about her relationship with another woman. The Court's sanction implies that the right of parents to choose the education they want to give their children according to their religious convictions is limited. Chilean law provides that the religious communities certify who can teach their tenets and dogmas.



Source: Cardenal Antonio Samore High School, San Bernardo, Chile.





- June 2022, La Habana. Two LGBTI activists break into a Christian youth meeting in La Piragua. The activists recorded while shouting and **offending** the participants, calling them “fundamentalists” and claiming that they could not be praying in a public space.
- April 2022, Las Tunas. A prayer event organized by pastors Mario Jorge Travieso and Velmis Fuerte was **anceled** after the government repeatedly threatened the organizers and the families of political prisoners who were to participate.
- February 2022, La Habana. The pastors of the Baptist Church, Karel Lescalle Matos, and Yaimel Romaguera, together with the evangelical pastor Jatniel Pérez, were **summoned** by the Ministry of the Interior to appear before the authorities.

- February 2022, Santiago de Cuba. Police officers **detained** Pastor Alain Toledano and his family upon entering the city of Santiago de Cuba. The officers ordered them to open their luggage for search; when they refused, they were taken to the third police unit and detained for a short time.



Source: “Preparation meeting for the prayer event organized by Pastors Mario Jorge Travieso and Velmis Fuerte”. CSW.



- June 2022, Guadalajara. Bishop Robles Ortega, Cardinal of Guadalajara, **denounces** that criminal groups in the area demanded 50% of the income during the patron saint festivities as a floor fee to carry out activities in the public square.
- June 2022, Chihuahua. President López Obrador called priests **hypocrites** after listening to the criticism of Jesuit priest Javier Ávila regarding the security strategy in the Sierra Tarahumara, where two Jesuit priests were recently murdered.

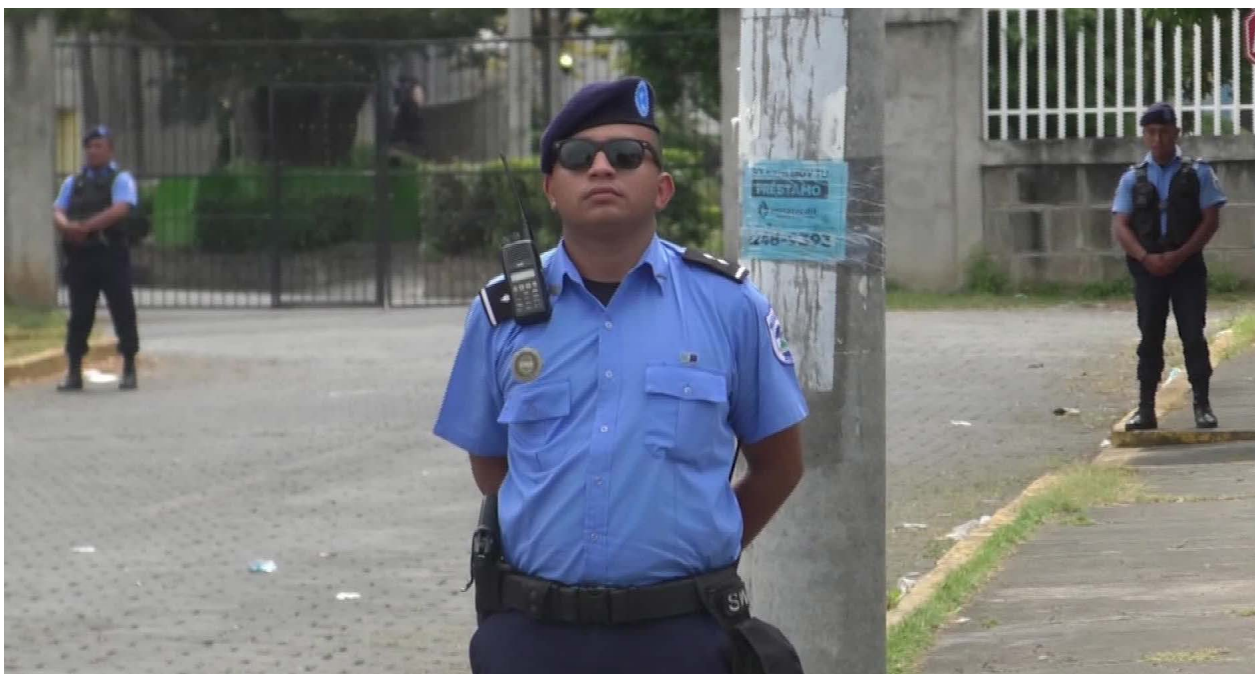
- June 2022. Federal legislators approved a series of reforms to the General Health Law, among which the exercise of conscientious objection on religious grounds, among others, is **restricted**, conditioning its legitimacy to the fulfillment of specific criteria.



Source: “Legislators of the Health Commission of the Chamber of Deputies approved reforms to the General Health Law”. El Financiero.



- May 2022, Masaya. Police officers guarding Father Harvy Padilla closed the church door and **prevented** parishioners from entering and participating in the liturgical celebration.
- May 2022, Managua. Sandinista police besieged priest Uriel Vallejos, parish priest of the Divina Misericordia de Sébaco, Matagalpa. The priest **denounced** having been photographed and harassed by officers stationed outside the headquarters of the Apostolic Nunciature.
- April 2022. Managua. Evangelical pastors Tom and Debbie Guess arrived from Miami, were **detained** at the airport, and prevented from entering the country to preach.
- February 2022. The Legislative Assembly **canceled** the legal registration of five Catholic institutions. The Association of the Technical Agricultural Institute of the Diocese of Estelí "Fray Fernando Espino," the Association of Parish Schools of the Diocese of Estelí, Caritas Estelí, the Associations of the Justice and Peace Commissions - Diocese of Estelí, and the Catholic Cultural Center of the North.
- February 2022, Estelí. The Legislative Assembly **canceled** the legal registration of the Universidad Católica Agrícola del Trópico, expropriating it and transferring its administration to the state, changing its name to Universidad Nacional Francisco Luis Espinoza Pineda.



Source: "Police stationed in front of Catholic temples". CNN en Español.

*This database is updated continuously,
so the number of incidents may vary as
new cases are registered/identified.
To view the total number of incidents,
enter [here](#)*



OBSERVATORY OF
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IN LATIN AMERICA

