IIRF Reports

Marcela A. Bordón Lugo

Non-Governmental Actors Violating Religious Freedom in the Southern Cone of the Americas

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International Institute for Religious Freedom

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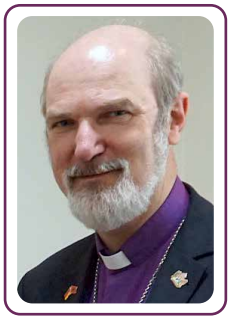

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Introduction

Analyses of restrictions on religious freedom often begin with the actions of authoritarian governments or discriminatory state policies. Yet, in the Southern Cone of the Americas, many of the most significant constraints arise from non-state actors.

These actors exert pressure through direct violence, social exclusion, symbolic coercion, and territorial displacement. This brief report seeks to identify such actors and to show how their actions shape a complex, and often overlooked, panorama of restrictions on religious freedom.

It is important to note that the present report is not intended to be exhaustive or definitive; rather, it is an approach to a social and cultural context with which some readers and academics may be unfamiliar. For this report, the Southern Cone is understood as the region integrated by Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

The report addresses four thematic axes: (1) indigenous communities, (2) organized crime, (3) secularism and ideological groups, and (4) the paradox of confessional or faith-based organizations that, in some cases, have become obstacles to the promotion of religious freedom.

1. Indigenous Communities

a. Environmental Degradation

In discussions about indigenous communities, emphasis is often placed on their relationship with the land, their agricultural practices, or their cultural identity. Less frequently acknowledged is the spiritual and religious dimension of these traditions. For many indigenous peoples, territory is not simply a physical or economic resource—it is a sacred space, the foundation of their identity, and central to their ceremonial life. Damage to the territory therefore undermines not only social and environmental rights but also religious freedom, understood as the capacity to live, transmit, and practice beliefs linked to a spiritual environment.

A clear example is found in Paraguay. In 2021, the UN Human Rights Committee ruled that the state had violated the rights of the Campo Agua'ẽ indigenous community of the Ava Guaraní people, following massive pollution caused by agrochemical fumigations from neighboring soy companies.[1]

Ceremonial practices such as baptism (*mitãkarai*) are no longer performed due to the loss of materials for constructing dance houses (*jerokyha*) and the disappearance of corn used to prepare chicha (*kagüi*), a central element of the

[1] OHCHR. (2021, October 14). Paraguay: Failing to prevent contamination violates indigenous people's right to traditional lands – UN Human Rights Committee. *Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights*. https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/10/paraguay-failing-prevent-contamination-violates-indigenous-peoples-right

ceremony. The absence of these rites deprives children of a crucial marker of cultural identity and weakens community structures, as families are forced to migrate.

b. Extraction of natural resources by legal and illegal companies

These cases are more documented in cases from Colombia and Brazil, especially in Amazonian territories; however, similar cases are observed in the Southern Cone.

Complaints have been received from indigenous communities in which consultations were not carried out or, in some cases, were precarious and partial.[2] Excessive mining causes serious environmental damage,[3] which prevents the free exercise of religious freedom, such as access to sacred sites, and can lead to their destruction; it can even impede the consumption and sacredness of water springs.[4]

Extractive companies, depending on the country and the nature of the resources extracted, have carried out these activities under the protection of the law or, in some cases, outside it. Legal mining, authorized by the State, must meet the requirements of international standards to operate in territories where indigenous communities live. In doing so, these companies must comply with prior informed consultation, while considering the existence of authorized passages for the transfer of communities to their sacred sites.[5]

Illegal mining and logging expose indigenous communities to harassment and violence.[6] Faced with these illegal enterprises, Indigenous communities may face additional threats, such as the incursion of illegal miners into Indigenous lands, where they burn the homes of Indigenous communities or sexually abuse women and girls as a form of harassment to force them to leave the lands from which the intruders plan to extract minerals or cut down trees.[7]

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2 Bispo, F. (2022, April 28). Mining firm accused of coercing indigenous groups to exploit potash in Amazon. *Dialogue Earth*. https://dialogue.earth/en/forests/53258-amazon-potash-mining-firm-accused-coercing-indigenous-groups-exploit/

3 Ebus, B. (2018, January 24). El crecimiento del Arco Minero de Venezuela barre a los pueblos y culturas indígenas. *Mongabay*. https://es.mongabay.com/?p=194586

4 Campos Sandoval, A. (2022, November 22). Río Cotuhé, invadido por la minería ilegal y los grupos armados. *Agencia Prensa Rural*. https://prensarural.org/spip/spip.php?article28693

5 CIDH. (2015). Pueblos indígenas, comunidades afrodescendientes y recursos naturales: Protección de derechos humanos en el contexto de actividades de extracción, explotación y desarrollo. *Comisión Interamericana Derechos Humanos*. https://oas.org/es/cidh/informes/pdfs/IndustriasExtractivas2016.pdf

6 CAAAP. (2021, August 12). Frontera Perú – Brasil: Denuncian conflicto entre indígenas y empresas madereras por destrucción de bosques. *Centro Amazónico de Antropología y Aplicación Práctica*. https://caaap.org.pe/?p=22654

7 Radwin, M. (2022, February 15). Nicaragua: violencia desplaza a comunidades indígenas y las deja sin tierras en Bosawás. *Mongabay*. https://es.mongabay.com/?p=231791

In addition, the use of mercury by extractive companies has polluted waterways essential for the survival of indigenous communities and forced them to move to find new sources of water and food. A recent case that we can mention is that of the Mbyá Guaraní indigenous communities in Paso Yobái, Department of Guairá, Paraguay.[8] As a result of displacement, their ability to grow and grow their own food, as well as to drink water or fish, is limited, indirectly affecting the religious freedom of indigenous communities, as the consequent environmental damage makes it impossible to grow food in accordance with ancestral religious practices.

c. Conflicts with Mapuche Community

In recent years, there have been several episodes of burning and vandalism of Christian churches in La Araucanía, attributed to small, radicalized groups such as Weichán Auka Mapu. One of the most serious attacks occurred in 2016, when eleven churches were burned in less than two months, both Catholic and Evangelical.[9] These events are part of a historical and political-territorial conflict between the Chilean State and sectors of the Mapuche people.

The temples become targets not because of a direct opposition to the Christian faith, but because of their symbolic meaning: they are perceived as institutions linked to colonization and the processes of cultural assimilation imposed on the Mapuche people since the nineteenth century.[10] In this way, the attacks function as an affront to the Chilean state and its power structures, rather than as a permanent and repetitive religious persecution.

However, these acts do violate the religious freedom of local communities, who are restricted in their ability to freely assemble and practice their faith for fear of further attacks. The burning of temples not only destroys infrastructure, but also produces self-censorship, fear and community fragmentation, limiting in practice the right of worship of Catholics and Evangelicals who live in the area.

It is crucial to underline that the majority of the Mapuche people do not participate in these events. On the contrary, a large part of the Mapuche communities are Christian or practices syncretic forms of spirituality that integrate their ancestral worldview with Christianity. In fact, there are Mapuche pastorals, such

[8] AFP. (2025, March 21). ¿Crimen ecológico en Paso Yobái?: yerbateros e indígenas contra el oro en Paraguay. *Editorial Azeta s.a. (Abc Color)*. https://abc.com.py/ciencia/2025/03/31/crimen-ecologico-en-paso-yobai-yerbateros-e-indigenas-contra-el-oro-en-paraguay/

[9] Díaz, F.; Rivera, V.; Zamorano, C. (2017, September 3). Weichan Auka Mapu: de la quema de iglesias al mayor ataque en el sur del país. *Latercera*. https://latercera.com/noticia/weichan-auka-mapu-la-quema-iglesias-al-mayor-ataque-sur-del-pais/

[10] Baeza Palavecino, A. (2016, April 12). Cuál sería el "punto de inicio" de los incendios a iglesias en La Araucanía. *Latercera*. https://latercera.com/noticia/cual-seria-el-punto-de-inicio-de-los-incendios-a-iglesias-en-la-araucania/

as those of the Catholic Church, which pray and actively work for peace and justice for the Mapuche people.[11]

For this reason, the attacks must be understood as the action of small, violent and ideologized groups, which instrumentalize the Mapuche identity for political purposes. It seems that they do not represent the majority, but the attacks do generate serious consequences. They impact restrictions of religious freedom, by preventing or hindering safe access to places of worship; damage social cohesion, by deepening divisions and projecting the false image that all Mapuche people are hostile to Christianity; increase distrust of the State, due to its difficulty in guaranteeing security and justice in the face of these events.

The attacks on churches in La Araucanía are not a religious conflict in the strict sense, but an expression of historical and territorial tensions. However, its effects fall directly on the religious freedom of Christian communities, including many of Mapuche origin, by limiting their fundamental right to worship and community life of faith.

2. Organized crime

Organized crime has become one of the greatest social challenges in Latin America. It is likely that we will see more frequently cases from Colombia reported in the press and in studies on crime, however, this actor is not absent in the Southern Cone region. While the presence of these organizations in the region is not as widely reported, their impact on churches is increasing, especially on base communities where pastoral work is in tension due to the proliferation of criminal life in young people from an early age.

Its impact goes far beyond citizen security. Wherever the State withdraws, criminal groups occupy the vacuum, control territories and directly affect the lives of communities.

In Argentina, the Catholic Church has raised its voice to denounce the advance of drug trafficking in vulnerable neighborhoods. In a June 2025 statement, bishops pointed out that the withdrawal of the state is tantamount to condemning entire communities, and that parishes are overwhelmed trying to contain the consequences: addictions, violence, young people without opportunities. The denunciation is clear: without a state presence, organized crime imposes its rules, restricts spaces of community life and limits the pastoral work of the Church.[12]

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[11] Maldonado, M. (2018, November 21). Oración por la justicia y paz para el pueblo Mapuche. *Arzobispado de Santiago*. https://iglesiadesantiago.cl/noticias/generales/oracion-por-la-justicia-y-paz-para-el-pueblo-mapuche

[12] Chaves, F. (2025, June 23). La Iglesia criticó al Gobierno por el avance narco en los barrios: "La retirada del Estado es una forma indirecta de condenar a muchos a la muerte". *Infobae*. https://infobae.com/politica/2025/06/23/la-iglesia-critico-al-gobierno-por-el-avance-narco-en-los-barrios-la-retirada-del-estado-es-una-forma-indirecta-de-condenar-a-muchos-a-la-muerte/

Similar situations are observed in Chile, where the strengthening of gangs such as the Tren de Aragua has transformed the criminal landscape. Recent reports warn that organized crime not only traffics drugs, but also controls neighborhoods, intimidates the population, and displaces institutions that previously played a role in social cohesion, including churches.[13] In these contexts, temples and religious organizations face a paradox: they are seen by the community as spaces of refuge, but they can also become targets of extortion or threats if they are perceived as a threat to criminal control.

The impact on religious freedom manifests itself on several levels. First, in the restriction of public worship: when fear paralyzes the faithful, many celebrations are reduced or moved underground. Second, in the limitation of pastoral work: religious leaders who denounce violence or support victims become targets, forced into silence or exile. And third, in the weakening of the community: when violence fragments social life, it also erodes the possibility for religious communities to transmit faith, organize educational activities or maintain social development projects.

This is not a direct attack on religion itself, but it does constitute a form of structural violation of religious freedom. Organized crime generates an environment in which the practice of the faith, the gathering of the faithful and the social action of the churches becomes dangerous, precarious or unsustainable. In neighborhoods where gangs rule, creeds are no longer exercised in freedom, but under the shadow of intimidation.

It cannot be ruled out that this also occurs in Paraguay or Uruguay, but according to the information available, it seems to be minor or at least not very visible, but not non-existent.

3. Secularism and ideological groups

In the Southern Cone there is another, more silent phenomenon: the progressive expulsion of religion from public space. It is not a legal mandate, but a cultural and social dynamic that reduces religion to the private sphere, generating a secularism that often ends up being exclusive. It is important to consider that there is non-state actors often involved with this new secularist culture, whose motivation is not necessarily criminal in an economic sense, but political-ideological. Some of these groups are organized from radicalized positions, often leftist, feminist or other social justice agendas, and in certain contexts, they have staged violent or symbolic protest actions that attack churches.

These groups do not represent all civil society or all social movements; however, their action has real impacts on religious freedom, especially when churches are perceived as part of power (whether because of their historical, symbolic, or institutional role).

[13] Espinosa, V. (2023, January 22). El crimen organizado en Chile: ¿Un camino sin retorno? *Universidad del Decarrollo*. https://prensa.udd.cl/?p=117013

A paradigmatic example is Uruguay, traditionally recognized as the most secularized country in Latin America. As the Institute of Religious Sciences of Montevideo points out, Uruguayan national identity was largely built in opposition to religion, with a marked separation between Church and State. This has led to a culture where the expression of faith in public space is perceived with distrust, almost as an undue interference in civil life.[14] Thus, although there is religious freedom in the formal sense, in practice a social climate is generated that discourages the visibility of religion in politics, education and public debate.

In other countries of the Southern Cone the situation is different, but the tensions are similar. In Argentina, secularization is expressed in a growing rejection of the influence of the Church in ethical and social debates, especially around sexual and reproductive rights. During the discussion of the law on voluntary termination of pregnancy in 2020, the voice of the Catholic Church was challenged by broad social and political sectors, which called for a public space free of "religious imposition". Although the Church continues to have institutional weight, its legitimacy has weakened and its discourse is increasingly perceived as one position among others, not as the hegemonic morality of the nation.

In Chile, the process is even more complex. Chilean society was deeply Catholic for much of the 20th century, and the Church was recognized for its defense of human rights during the dictatorship. However, the many cases of sexual abuse within the Church—particularly the Karadima case—caused a deep break in the trust of the citizenry. In 2018, Pope Francis accepted the resignation of five Chilean bishops amid the scandal, acknowledging the magnitude of the crisis. That break transcended the younger generations, who grew up not only disappointed, but also distrustful of the institution that was once a moral reference and defender of human dignity. The consequence is a massive distancing of young people, who not only distance themselves from religious practice, but also look askance at any attempt by the Church to regain prominence in public space.

In the context of the Chilean social outburst of 2019–2020, the motivation does not seem to be a confessional attack on faith, but a symbolic attack: churches associated with the state, with institutions that protesters see as authoritarian or responsible for abuses of power, inequality or repression. The church becomes part of the stage in which authority, history, collective memory and demands for justice converge.

Churches such as the San Francisco de Borja Church (also known as the Carabineros Church) and the Parish of the Assumption were burned. The San Francisco de Borja Church was an institutional temple of the Carabineros, the uniformed police, with a direct symbolic relationship with state institutions. It was set on fire on January 3, 2020, by a group of approximately fifteen hooded people.

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[14] Lía, L. (2025, September 11). La búsqueda de la necesaria libertad religiosa: Informe sobre laicidad, laicismo y libertad religiosa. *Iglesia Católica de Montevideo*. https://icm.org.uy/?p=30510

Clearly, the religious freedom of the parishioners of these and other parishes and temples was affected, but I bring this reflection to emphasize that there is no pattern of behavior that reveals that the burning of these churches comes hand in hand with a spirit of religious persecution explicitly. Rather, they are related to their link with authority and the state.

4. Confessional non-state actors and the paradox of defending religious freedom

The present section is principally based on a preliminary investigation into the impact of these organizations on international relations.[15]

When we think of non-state actors that violate religious freedom, it is common to identify those who openly declare themselves against the church or the faith: radical groups, organized crime, ideologized sectors. However, a deeper analysis shows that also within organizations and movements that claim to defend Christian values, dynamics have been generated that, far from strengthening, have weakened the cause of religious freedom in the region.

Since the early 2010s, the pro-life and pro-family lobby has consolidated itself in several Latin American countries as a relevant actor in the political and diplomatic arena. Although their initial contribution made the importance of faith-related issues visible in public debate, the way in which these groups have articulated their demands has generated a growing ideologization of faith. In many cases, their discourse became exclusive, radical and confrontational, placing the defenders of these values on one side and feminists or LGBTIQ+ groups on the other, in a logic of "good guys against bad guys," an appropriation of religious and moral discourse by nationalist ideologies.

This phenomenon has had at least two clear consequences:

- Political appropriation of religious discourse: in Paraguay, sectors of the Colorado Party have presented themselves as defenders of the "family" or "Christian values", despite being strongly questioned for corruption and clientelist practices. Religious discourse becomes an instrumental resource for obtaining votes, rather than a real commitment to freedom of faith. Similarly, in Colombia, the MIRA party has been able to use the banner of religious freedom as a political platform. In both cases, the effect is the politicization of faith, which erodes the credibility of religious discourse and generates social distrust. Religious leaders are clear about it, I can remember the words of bishops in Paraguay denouncing the corruption of these referents, however, among the faithful themselves they prefer to maintain positions or associate in organizations that even question or belittle the words of their pastors.

[15] Bordón Lugo, M.A. (2024). Diplomacia religiosa en la Organización de los Estados Americanos: Desafíos para una promoción de la libertad religiosa en las Américas. *Derecho en Socie-dad, 18*(2), 223–238. https://doi.org/10.63058/des.v18i2.246

- Silencing international forums in the diplomatic sphere: the radicalization of the debate has had a counterproductive effect. Many diplomats and state representatives prefer to avoid the issue of religious freedom so as not to fall into sterile discussions between opposing agendas: pro-life versus feminist, pro-family versus LGBTIQ+ groups. As I argue in my essay on religious diplomacy at the OAS, this has left the international space open to actors who are able to better adapt to the IACHR's human rights language, while religious freedom as such is relegated or made invisible.[16] The Vatican representation plays an important role, but it seems to be disavowed by social actors who use religious discourse in ways even less diplomatic than the representation of the Holy See.

Consequences of polarization

- Loss of social credibility: many confessional organizations are associated with conjunctural political struggles, weakening their role as moral or spiritual references in international scenarios. Faith-based organizations that work on cross-cutting issues such as migration and the defense of children are lost sight of, for fear of linking them with polarizing organizations such as pro-life and family groups.
- Lack of religious literacy: in many social and political sectors, there is a lack of knowledge of what religious freedom really means beyond a slogan, which facilitates its political manipulation.
- Internal resistance: both clergy and faithful are wary of the issue, fearing that talk of religious freedom will be seen as alignment with radicalized political positions. I saw a very valuable gesture in the Archbishopric of Asunción by holding an ecumenical and interreligious meeting for peace, which was celebrated by some parishioners, while others, condemning dialogue between religions and denominations.[17] The resistance is ideologized, although it is not very visible in Paraguay publicly, public opinion is affected by the opinions of social leaders and even content creators who misinform and condemn this type of action in favor of religious freedom or interreligious dialogue.
- Extreme ideologization: groups that, from the right or from the left, use religious or spiritual language to legitimize political positions are multiplying. This increases fragmentation and polarization.
- Democratic delegitimization: by using religion as a political weapon, trust in democracy and in international organizations is eroded, accused of being captured by one or another ideological bloc.

Paradoxically, many of the actors who have sought to raise the banner of "Christian values" have become an obstacle to the serious and consensual promotion of religious freedom in Latin America. The radicalization of their discourses has not only fueled the reaction of equally ideologized progressive

[16] Ibid.

[17] Arzobispado de la Santísima. (2025, August 13). Encuentro Ecuménico y de Diálogo Interreligioso – 12 de agosto 2025. https://arzobispado.org.py/?p=16237

sectors but has also generated a climate of polarization that prevents constructive dialogue.

The result is that, while at the local level religious discourse is used to legitimize questioned political projects, at the international level the issue is marginalized for fear of confrontation. At both levels, religious freedom, understood as an integral human right that protects everyone, ends up weakened.

Conclusion

Religious freedom in the Southern Cone is constrained not only by state policies but also by non-state actors. From environmental degradation affecting indigenous spiritual practices, to organized crime undermining community life, to ideological movements pushing religion from public spaces to confessional groups whose radicalization fuels polarization—the panorama is complex and multidimensional. A deeper understanding of these dynamics is essential to strengthening religious freedom as a universal human right that protects all communities, regardless of creed or ideology.

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