

AUSTRALIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy in Canberra and the U.S. consulates in Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney regularly engaged with a wide range of religious leaders, communities, and groups, and also participated in and sponsored events involving religious leaders to promote religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to November 2012 data from the Bureau of Statistics, the population is 22.8 million. According to the 2011 census, 61 percent of citizens consider themselves Christian, including 25 percent Roman Catholic and 17 percent Anglican, while 22.3 percent report having no religious affiliation. Buddhists constitute 2.5 percent of the population, Muslims 2.2 percent, Hindus 1.3 percent, and Jews 0.5 percent.

The census indicated that indigenous persons constitute 2.5 percent of the population (approximately 548,370 people) and that 1 percent of indigenous respondents practice traditional indigenous religions. Affiliation with a traditional indigenous religion is higher in very remote areas (6 percent) than in all other areas (less than 1 percent). Around 60 percent of indigenous respondents identify themselves as Christian and around 20 percent report having no religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution bars the federal government from making any law that imposes a state religion or religious observance, prohibits the free exercise of religion, or sets a religious test for a federal public office. Although the government is secular, each session of parliament begins with a joint recitation of the Lord's Prayer.

Individuals who suffer religious discrimination have recourse under federal discrimination laws or through the court system and bodies such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Federal laws that protect freedom of religion include the Racial Discrimination Act, the Human Rights Commission Act, and the Workplace Relations Act. The country accepts refugees fleeing religious persecution and is party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol governing refugees.

Commonwealth and state public service agencies are active in promoting religious tolerance in the workplace. Public service employees who believe they are denied a promotion on religious grounds can appeal to the public service merit protection commissioner.

The state of Tasmania is the only state or territory whose constitution specifically provides citizens with the right to profess and practice their religion; however, seven of the eight states and territories have laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of a person's religion or ethno-religious background. South Australia is the only jurisdiction that does not explicitly prohibit discrimination on the grounds of religion. All jurisdictions, apart from South Australia, have independent agencies to mediate allegations of religious discrimination.

Religious groups are not required to register; however, to receive tax-exempt status, nonprofit religious groups must apply to the Australia Tax Office (ATO). Registration with the ATO has no effect on how religious groups are monitored, apart from standard ATO checks.

The government permits religious education in public schools, generally taught by volunteers using approved curricula, with the option for parents to have their children not attend. The government's National School Chaplaincy Program, established in 2007, provides annual support of up to A\$20,000 (\$20,800) in urban areas and A\$24,000 (\$24,960) in remote areas for government and nongovernment school communities to establish or extend school chaplaincy services. In 2011 the government authorized A\$222 million (\$230.9 million) to be dispersed between 2012 and 2014 to continue funding participating schools and extend funding to

1,000 additional schools in remote and disadvantaged areas. In June, following a challenge by a private individual, the High Court ruled that the program exceeded the Commonwealth's spending powers. Later that month, parliament passed legislation authorizing the program. Public schools in New South Wales provide secular ethics classes as an alternative for students who do not attend optional scripture classes. The federal government provides funding to private schools, the majority of which are faith-based.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

In March the Land and Environment Court declared the Liverpool Council's consent to build an Islamic School in Hoxton Park invalid on the basis that the local council failed to consider the environmental impact of the development. The court permitted the school to operate through March 2013. In July the school lodged a new application for development with the local council. The application was pending at year's end.

The government had extensive programs that promoted respect for diversity and cultural pluralism. The country participated in the United Nations Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace and was a cosponsor of the Regional Interfaith Dialogue with Indonesia, New Zealand, and the Philippines. In 2008 the government established the Multicultural Advisory Council to provide advice on "social cohesion issues relating to Australia's cultural and religious diversity." The government provided a range of programs that focused on youth outreach and early intervention, education, and "deradicalization" of individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses in prison.

The government's national multicultural policy, "The People of Australia," was based on a government-wide approach to maintaining a socially cohesive and harmonious society and included religious tolerance as a component.

In December the Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority announced that beginning in 2014, it would include the Holocaust in the mandatory curriculum in schools nationwide for students aged 14 to 16.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) promoted tolerance and better understanding among religious groups in the country. These groups included the Columban Center for Christian-Muslim Relations, the National Council of Churches in Australia and its affiliated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission, the Australian Council of Christians and Jews, and the Affinity Intercultural Foundation.

In the 12-month period ending in September, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, an NGO, recorded 543 anti-Semitic incidents, compared with 517 during the previous 12 months. These incidents included physical and verbal assaults, such as throwing eggs at Jewish people walking to and from synagogues, vandalism, and harassment.

Some expressions of anti-Semitic sentiment by private citizens in mainstream and social media and other public commentary received media scrutiny. For example, Cardinal George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, apologized in April after making what Jewish leaders described as “deeply problematic” comments about Jews during a public debate. In August a popular radio show host publicly apologized following what many considered an inappropriate Holocaust-related joke on the air.

In September a Jewish man won a compensation claim after being the victim of anti-Semitic “bullying and harassment” while employed at the Taxation Office in 2009.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy in Canberra and the consulates in Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney regularly engaged a wide range of religious leaders, communities, and groups.

Consulate general Sydney maintained close relations with the city’s large Jewish community and established a presence with several religious schools, including in Western Sydney, where many Muslims reside and attend school.

During the year, the consul general in Perth met leaders of the city's diverse Muslim community organizations and representatives of Muslim organizations in Western Australia.

Building on the momentum provided by last year's visit of the Department of State special representative for Muslim outreach, the consulate general in Melbourne brought speakers to schools in predominantly Muslim areas, partnered with interfaith and multicultural groups in a public commemoration of September 11, and participated in the launch of the Islamic Council of Victoria's office for women. The consulate also facilitated connections between Muslim communities and other organizations, such as the Australian Rules Football League, to partner with young Muslim women to introduce athletics into new areas.

The embassy and consulates also promoted religious freedom by sponsoring and participating in events with religious leaders. Embassy Canberra hosted leaders of various faith-based communities at its September 11 commemoration. Embassy Canberra also hosted quarterly events that brought together Canberra youth from a variety of backgrounds and religions to discuss informally contemporary problems. Embassy Canberra officers participated in Canberra's largest and highest profile iftar event. Consulate general Sydney hosted a large interfaith iftar dinner. Consulate Sydney officers attended an iftar dinner hosted by the Affinity Intercultural Foundation at the New South Wales State Parliament building.

In November consulate general Perth hosted more than 60 guests at its annual interfaith reception. Guests included representatives from the Muslim, Roman Catholic, Hindu, Christian, and Bahai communities, as well as academics. The event's theme was the incompatibility of violent extremism with all faiths. During the year, the consulate hosted quarterly events that brought together Western Australia's youth from a variety of backgrounds and religious groups for informal discussions of contemporary problems.

The consulate general in Melbourne actively engaged with Muslim communities in the Melbourne area, especially during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. The consulate general hosted an iftar dinner, which brought together youth leaders from the media, sports, business, and faith communities. In addition to hosting the annual iftar dinner, the consul general attended several iftar events hosted by a university, the Victorian State Parliament, and local business councils. Consulate staff attended small iftar events at local residences as well as larger events hosted by civic and political organizations and held in the country's multicultural tradition of celebrating cultural diversity.

Through exchange programs, the embassy and consulates have sent several influential Muslim leaders to the United States.