

AUSTRALIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies provide for religious freedom. The government ran extensive programs to support cultural and religious pluralism, and announced it would reorganize a religious education program for public schools to keep it viable after a court ruling against the program.

A number of societal incidents affecting religious groups took place following high-profile counterterrorism raids and the stabbing of two policemen by a Muslim identified by the justice minister as a “known terror suspect,” including reports of abuses and vandalism against Muslim communities. Prominent government and societal leaders condemned these acts and took steps to advance religious tolerance.

The U.S. Embassy in Canberra and the U.S. Consulates General in Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney regularly engaged with a wide range of religious leaders, faith communities and groups, and government officials to promote religious freedom. Mission efforts to engage with Muslim communities and promote religious tolerance, including the Ambassador’s outreach to the Muslim community in person and through social media, were redoubled following the increase in high-profile anti-Muslim acts.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 22.5 million (July 2014 estimate). 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 and that 1 percent of indigenous respondents practice traditional indigenous religions. Among this group, affiliation with a traditional indigenous religion is higher in very remote areas (6 percent) than in all other areas (less than 1 percent). Approximately 60 percent of indigenous respondents identify themselves as Christian and an estimated 20 percent report having no religious affiliation.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

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 establishes a religious test for a federal public office. There are certain legal limitations on the right to religious freedom, such as when necessary to protect public safety, order, and health, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. Individuals who suffer religious discrimination have recourse under federal discrimination laws or through the court system and bodies such as the Australian Human Rights Commission.

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 state or territory that does not explicitly prohibit discrimination on the grounds of religion. All other states and territories, 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 treated, 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. There is no national standard for approving religious curricula, which happens at state and local levels. Public schools in New South Wales provide secular ethics classes as an alternative for students who do not attend optional scripture classes.

Government Practices

In early October, the parliament's administrators announced that persons with facial coverings entering the galleries of the House of Representatives and Senate

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during official proceedings would be seated in enclosed viewing sections behind glass panels. The announcement drew criticism from public officials and media who argued the new rule unfairly targeted Muslim women and set a tone of mistrust. The administrators rescinded the rule 18 days after it was announced and before it could be applied, as the parliament did not convene during that period.

In June, the High Court ruled that the government's National School Chaplaincy Program, which provides annual support per school of up to 20,000 Australian dollars (A\$) (\$16,400) in urban areas and A\$24,000 (\$19,700) in remote areas for government and nongovernment school communities to establish or extend school chaplaincy services, was unconstitutional. The government subsequently announced in August that it would continue the program, but would reorganize it so that the federal government would distribute funds to states and territories and not directly to schools. In May, the government announced it would spend A\$243.8 million (\$200 million) between 2014 and 2018 on the program. Federal government education spending includes funding to private schools, the majority of which are faith-based.

The government's Multicultural Advisory Council provided advice on "social cohesion issues relating to Australia's cultural and religious diversity." The government's national multicultural policy, *The People of Australia*, is based on a government-wide approach to maintaining a socially cohesive and harmonious society, and includes religious tolerance as a component. Commonwealth and state public service agencies were active in promoting religious tolerance in the workplace. For example, in its Multicultural Plan, the Australian Public Service Commission called for alterations to its training center to accommodate cultural and religious observances, diet, and communications. Public service employees who believed they were denied a promotion on religious grounds could appeal to the public service merit protection commissioner.

The government provided a range of programs to promote religious tolerance that focused on youth outreach and early intervention, education, and "deradicalization" in prison of individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses. The country was a cosponsor of the Regional Interfaith Dialogue with Indonesia, New Zealand, and the Philippines to help broaden respect for religious diversity in the region, including in Australia.

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Each session of parliament began with a recitation of the Lord's Prayer.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Reported societal incidents included physical and verbal assaults and vandalism. Prominent societal leaders condemned such occurrences and took positive steps to emphasize religious freedom and tolerance.

In the 12-month period ending in September 2014, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ), a nongovernmental organization (NGO), reported 312 anti-Semitic incidents had been logged by it, Jewish community umbrella groups in each state and the Australian Capital Territory, and community security groups, compared with 231 recorded by those same organizations during the previous 12-month period. Incidents included physical and verbal assaults, such as throwing eggs at Jews walking to and from synagogues, vandalism, and harassment. The ECAJ stated in its report it was likely the overall increase in the number of anti-Semitic incidents during the year was due to reaction to the conflict in Gaza.

In July, a man in Melbourne reported being attacked and injured by several men who shouted anti-Semitic statements. No arrests had been made in the case by year's end. In August five male teenagers were arrested for threatening 30 Jewish school children on a school bus in Sydney. Media alleged the perpetrators, who were released into their parents' custody pending further investigation, threatened to slit the children's throats and yelled "kill the Jews" and "*heil Hitler*."

In 2013, five Jewish adults were assaulted in Sydney during a suspected anti-Semitic confrontation that reportedly resulted in the hospitalization of some of the victims. Police arrested two minors and two adults soon after the incident. The minors were subject to closed proceedings in juvenile court and media reported in July they remained in a facility for minors. The case against one adult was withdrawn in May by the prosecutor's office, which cited "insufficient evidence." The case against the second adult was dismissed in June by the magistrate, who said he could not be satisfied beyond a reasonable doubt that the man committed the alleged offenses.

On November 3, a Shia Muslim leader was shot outside a Sydney mosque. Media reports speculated the perpetrators may have been Sunni supporters of the Islamic

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State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), as several individuals had shouted pro-ISIL slogans at the mosque while driving by in the preceding hours, but there was also suspicion that the attack may have been connected to an internal dispute. The man survived and a police investigation of the shooting was ongoing.

In April vandalism of an Islamic center in Canberra reportedly caused tens of thousands of dollars in damage. A police investigation into the incident was ongoing. In September there were reports of incidents targeting Muslim and Christian communities. This followed high-profile counterterrorism raids in Sydney, Brisbane, and Melbourne, and the stabbing of two policemen in Melbourne by a Muslim, identified by the justice minister as a “known terror suspect,” who was shot and killed by police. A number of mosques were vandalized, and media reported at least 30 cases of Muslims – particularly women wearing the hijab – subjected to physical and verbal abuse in the weeks following the raids. In Sydney, police charged a man with “armed intent to commit an indictable offense” after he entered a Muslim school on September 26 armed with a large knife and asked if the school was Islamic. Following a September 16 incident in which death threats were allegedly yelled at a Christian school from a passing car that was said to be displaying an ISIL flag, two juveniles in Sydney were charged with intimidating a school staff member and behaving in an offensive manner.

Several NGOs promoted tolerance and better understanding among religious groups. The Columban Center for Christian-Muslim Relations and the Affinity Intercultural Foundation co-hosted in May the 12th annual Abraham Conference promoting interfaith communication. The Australian Council of Christians and Jews organized a lecture on religious liberty by the Attorney-General. The Lebanese Muslim Association, supported by the Department of Social Services, organized the first National Mosque Open Day on October 25 to promote dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims and to counteract religious prejudice and stereotypes.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. Embassy Canberra and U.S. Consulates General in Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney met with government officials to promote religious freedom and tolerance. They also engaged a wide range of religious leaders, faith communities, and

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groups. The embassy and consulates general used social media platforms to increase awareness of U.S. policy and activities supportive of religious freedom.

The embassy continued efforts to support religious tolerance and promote religious freedom. Following the April vandalism of the Canberra Islamic Center, the Ambassador was the first member of the diplomatic corps to visit the center to express solidarity with Canberra's Muslim community and support for mutual understanding and interfaith dialogue. The visit generated positive local media coverage and the embassy utilized social media to amplify the Ambassador's message. Members of the embassy subsequently joined in the local community's cleanup effort of the center.

In October the Ambassador hosted an event with Muslim religious and community leaders to discuss recent anti-Muslim incidents in Australia and ways in which the U.S. and Australian governments could improve efforts to counter radicalization and promote acceptance of all faiths. Also in October the Ambassador and a group of embassy staff members visited the Canberra Islamic Center in honor of "National Mosque Open House Day" and a rededication of the center following its refurbishment. The Ambassador spoke to an audience of more than 200 about the U.S. tradition of religious freedom and the benefits that flow from religious, ethnic, and cultural diversity.

The Consulate General in Sydney worked closely with the Australian Federal Police's community liaison team on youth-focused community engagement, including support for diversity and tolerance. The consulate general's representatives maintained close relations with an interfaith center at a university in Brisbane, providing a grant to help the center host an interfaith summit on the margins of the G-20 Leaders' Meeting.

The Consul General in Perth spoke about the importance of religious freedom at an annual multicultural celebration of the Eid Al-Adha holiday. Consulate general representatives participated in a variety of events that provided opportunities to highlight religious freedom and promote diversity and tolerance, including to Christian, Jewish, and Muslim groups. The consulate general also supported the inaugural Countering Violent Extremism Symposium and attended the launch of a Perth-based NGO against violent extremism to call attention to efforts to promote religious tolerance in the state of Western Australia.

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The Consulate General in Melbourne supported religious freedom through grants and programs targeted at influential individuals and NGOs within the Muslim community and from a range of different religious backgrounds. The grants and programs built the capacity for grantees and participants – especially youth and disadvantaged audiences – to advocate for their religious identity, advance interfaith dialogue, and promote greater understanding and tolerance for religious pluralism. The consulate general actively engaged Muslim communities to discuss the U.S. commitment to supporting religious tolerance. The consulate general hosted an annual youth iftar which brought together leaders from media, sports, business, NGOs, and faith communities to discuss religious freedom. In addition, consulate general representatives utilized their attendance at a number of iftar events hosted by organizations, including the Victorian Parliament, a law firm, and a think tank, to promote religious freedom and tolerance.