

# **BRAZIL 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The government continued to respect diverse religious traditions in form and practice by enforcing the constitution as well as other laws and policies protecting religious freedom. In particular, the constitution provides for the freedom of belief, protects the right to exercise religious ceremonies, and guarantees no one can be deprived of their rights as a citizen based on religion. The justice system tends to minimize complaints of discrimination against practitioners of African Brazilian religions.

Societal discrimination based on religious affiliation was generally directed at practitioners of African-originated religions. There were also some reports of evangelical Christians targeting Catholics.

The U.S. embassy and consulates met with government officials, and actively engaged with civil society groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to facilitate interfaith dialogue and promote religious tolerance. Outreach efforts included meetings with religious leaders and participation in interfaith events.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 202.7 million (July 2014 estimate). According to the 2010 census, an estimated 64.6 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 22 percent is Protestant. Approximately 60 percent of Protestants belong to Pentecostal churches, 18 percent belong to “traditional” Protestant churches, and 22 percent to other Protestant groups. Other Christian groups constituting less than 1 percent of the population include Jehovah’s Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Roughly 8 percent of the population is atheist, agnostic, did not state a religion, or their religion is unknown.

Other groups, each constituting less than 1 percent of the population, include African and syncretic religious groups such as Candomble and Umbanda, Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus. There are a small number of adherents of indigenous religious beliefs.

There are different assessments of the number of Muslims. According to the 2010 census, there are approximately 35,200 Muslims, while the Federation of Muslim

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Associations of Brazil considers the number to be about 1.5 million. Other observers estimate there are approximately 400,000-500,000 Muslims. There are significant Muslim communities in the cities of Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba, and Foz do Iguazu, as well as in smaller cities in the states of Parana, Rio Grande do Sul, Sao Paulo, and Rio de Janeiro.

According to the Jewish Confederation of Brazil, there are approximately 125,000 Jews, 65,000 of whom reside in Sao Paulo State and 25,000 in Rio de Janeiro State. Many other cities have smaller Jewish communities.

### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of worship and states no one can be deprived of their constitutional rights due to religious belief. In addition, the constitution prohibits federal, state, and local governments from either supporting or hindering any specific religion. The law provides penalties of up to five years in prison for crimes of religious intolerance. Courts may fine or imprison for two to five years anyone who displays, distributes, or broadcasts religiously intolerant material. It is illegal to write, edit, publish, or sell literature that promotes religious intolerance, including anti-Semitism.

In May Bahia's state government approved the Statute to Promote Racial Equality and Combat Religious Intolerance. The statute establishes structures to help civil society members focused on combatting racism to coordinate with the government and each other. It also calls for the creation of a reference center to attend to victims of intolerance.

The law provides for the right to practice religions of African origin. By law members of religions of African origin must have access to religious professionals in hospitals, prisons, and other institutions.

The Pew Research Center's Religion and Public Life Project found Brazil to have the lowest levels of government restriction on religion of the world's 25 most populous countries. There are no registration requirements for religious groups, and religious groups are free to establish places of worship, train clergy, and proselytize. Religious groups seeking tax-exempt status must register with the Department of Federal Revenue along with the local municipality. Different states and municipalities may each have their own requirements and regulations,

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however. Generally, each group must draw up a document stating the purpose of their congregation to ensure it is in line with the constitution, provide their accounting of finances, and have a fire inspection of any house of worship. Local zoning laws may affect where a religious group can build houses of worship or hold ceremonies due to noise ordinances. There is a general constitutional provision for access to religious services and counsel in all civil and military establishments.

Public schools are required to offer religious instruction, but neither the constitution nor legislation defines the parameters. By law the instruction is supposed to be non-denominational and non-proselytizing with alternative instruction for students who do not want to participate. The law prohibits public subsidies to schools operated by religious organizations.

### **Government Practices**

A Bahia official stated that the Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality received dozens of reports of African Brazilian religious symbols and houses of worship being vandalized. In some cases, practitioners of African Brazilian religions like Candomble were threatened and assaulted.

In February the Federal Public Ministry ordered Google Brazil to remove 15 YouTube videos that allegedly “promoted discrimination and intolerance” toward African-originated religions such as Candomble and Umbanda. In June a high-level federal court upheld the Federal Public Ministry’s initial order and required that the 15 videos be removed within 72 hours, and Google complied the same day.

In March the Supreme Court opened an inquiry to investigate whether evangelical pastor and Federal Deputy Marco Feliciano incited religious intolerance toward practitioners of African-originated religions. The Federal Public Ministry requested the inquiry after receiving complaints from African-originated religious groups claiming a video of one of Feliciano’s sermons contained intolerant language. If found guilty, Feliciano could receive up to three years in prison and a fine.

Although religious instruction was optional, in practice 49 percent of schools considered it a mandatory subject and approximately 80 percent did not offer alternatives or “opt out” options, according to a survey of school directors by QEDu, a nonprofit organization that provides information on education in Brazil.

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Each school defined the religious curriculum, usually in agreement with parent councils.

### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In 2014, the Secretariat of Human Rights received 42 complaints of discrimination, ranging from discrimination to physical violence, against adherents of African-originated religions through its human rights hotline.

In July a suspicious fire destroyed the home of a Candomble practitioner in the Rio de Janeiro suburb of Duque de Caxias. The victim told authorities that her property has been targeted eight times in recent years, stating attackers have destroyed sacred images, shot at her home, and set her car ablaze. Police and the state legislature's Commission against Racism, Homophobia, and Religious Intolerance were investigating the incident at year's end. The president of the commission told press the crimes were likely perpetrated by drug traffickers belonging to evangelical Christian churches.

In August a municipal school in Rio de Janeiro prevented a 12-year-old student from entering the building because he was wearing white shorts and a necklace, items that identified him as a Candomble practitioner. Rio de Janeiro's mayor apologized to the student's family, who decided to transfer him to another school. According to the 2014 *Anti-Defamation League's Global 100* report on anti-Semitism worldwide, 16 percent of Brazilian adults harbor anti-Semitic attitudes. In September a teacher at a private school in Rio de Janeiro included a question comparing Israelis to Nazis in a geography exam for eighth graders. The Rio Jewish Federation demanded a public apology, and the school subsequently apologized to all parents via e-mail. The question was removed from the exam, and the teacher was fired.

There were many efforts by civil society groups to promote interfaith dialogue. For example, the Abraham's Path Initiative, an international NGO, sponsored an annual "friendship run" in Sao Paulo that brought Jews, Christians, and Muslims together to increase interfaith understanding; more than 5,000 persons participated. On September 7, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim leaders gathered at one of Sao Paulo's largest churches to conduct a "Mass for Peace," promoting interfaith tolerance and dialogue in response to escalating violence in the Middle East. Representatives of the three faiths signed a declaration condemning violence and calling for the strengthening of human bonds in times of conflict.

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The Commission to Combat Religious Intolerance in Rio de Janeiro, in partnership with Rio de Janeiro State University, brought together diverse religious and nonreligious groups, including Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, spiritualists, and atheists. The Commission organized five forums in Rio during the year to discuss religious freedom.

The Catholic Church's Sao Paulo House of Reconciliation hosted monthly meetings with the Jewish community as part of its work to emphasize unity and reconciliation of differences among various Christian and Jewish religious groups.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy and consulate general officials met with government officials and local religious leaders, and supported organizations involved in the interfaith movement, such as the Abraham's Path Initiative. In September staff of the Consulate General in Rio de Janeiro met with the Rio de Janeiro State Secretariat of Social Assistance and Human Rights to discuss religious freedom.

To support interfaith dialogue, the Consulate General in Sao Paulo hosted an iftar in July for members of the Muslim and interfaith communities, which received local media coverage. In August the consulate general hosted the women's interfaith group Peace on the Table for its monthly meeting where participants discussed religious tolerance among other issues.