

URUGUAY 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and affirms the state supports no religion. Legal statutes prohibit discrimination based on religion. The government (the Supreme Court, the Attorney General's Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) together with the Latin American Jewish Congress sponsored an academic event titled "Anti-discrimination Law – Hate Crimes" to raise awareness of discrimination based on religion. The parliament approved a bill to establish March 19 as the date to commemorate secularism. The government supported several events commemorating the Holocaust, including one held in the parliament and through a nationally broadcast message. Some minority religious groups said the government gave greater attention to other religious groups, particularly Christian and Jewish groups.

In October unknown individuals twice vandalized the Holocaust memorial in Montevideo with anti-Semitic graffiti. On both occasions, local authorities immediately removed the graffiti and condemned the act of vandalism. On May 12, there were anti-Semitic messages posted online following a basketball game involving a Jewish team. The Interreligious Forum of Uruguay (IF), comprising representatives of different religious groups and spiritual expressions, continued its efforts to promote respect for religious diversity and tolerance through expanding opportunities for dialogue to strengthen relationships between religions and with members of society as a means to reduce societal-based discriminatory behavior.

U.S. embassy officials met with representatives from various government entities, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Forms of Discrimination (CHRXD) within the Ministry of Education and Culture, to discuss issues connected to religious freedom. Embassy officials met with religious leaders, including several minority religious groups and members of the IF, to discuss areas of interfaith collaboration and hear concerns on faith-related issues, such as legal avenues to practice freely Muslim burial rituals, anti-Semitic vandalism, and tensions between the government and religious organizations.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.4 million (July 2017 estimate). According to a 2014 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, 57

percent of the population self-identifies as Christian (42 percent Catholic and 15 percent Protestant), 37 percent as religious but unaffiliated, and 6 percent as other. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahais, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), the Valdese Church, Afro-Umbandists (who blend elements of Catholicism with animism and African and indigenous beliefs), Buddhists, and members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), and Brahma Kumaris. According to the poll, 0.3 percent of the population is Jewish and 0.1 percent Hindu. Although the 2014 Pew Center poll states 0.1 percent of the population self-identifies as Muslim, academics familiar with the Muslim community say Muslims constitute approximately 1 percent of the population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and states, "the State supports no religion." The penal code prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The constitution accords the Catholic Church the right to ownership of all its churches built wholly or partly with state funding, with the exception of chapels dedicated for use by asylums, hospitals, prisons, or other public establishments.

Religious groups are entitled to property tax exemptions only for their houses of worship. To receive such exemptions, a religious group must register as a nonprofit with the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) and present a dossier with the organization's structure and objectives. The ministry examines the dossier and determines if the religious group is eligible to receive a tax exemption. The MEC routinely registers groups submitting the required paperwork. If approved, the group may request a property tax exemption from the taxing authority, usually the municipal government.

Each local government regulates the use of its public land for burials. Many departments allow the services and rites of all religions in their public cemeteries.

The National Institute of Human Rights, an autonomous branch of the parliament, and the MEC's CHRXD enforce government compliance with antidiscrimination laws. Both organizations receive complaints of discrimination, conduct investigations, and issue rulings on whether discrimination occurred. The ruling

includes a recommendation on whether the case should receive a judicial or administrative hearing. Only the courts or the Ministry of Labor may sanction or fine for discrimination. The National Institute of Human Rights and the CHRXD provide free legal services to complainants.

In 2014 the corrections authority passed a protocol on the rights and obligations of inmates regarding religious activities in prison. The protocol regulates religious issues in prisons, including standardizing access for religious officials and religious meeting spaces. Several prisons in the country have a dedicated space for religious practices.

The constitution prohibits religious instruction in public schools. Public schools close on some Christian holidays, although, in deference to its secular nature, the government does not officially refer to holidays by their Christian names. Students belonging to non-Christian or minority religious groups may be absent from school on their religious holidays without penalty. Private schools run by religious organizations may decide which religious holidays to observe.

In order for religious workers to work in the country, they must provide certification from their church to confirm the identity of an applicant and to guarantee financial support. According to regulations, the state must enforce these standards equitably across all religious groups.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The CHRXD 2016-17 report covering incidents of discrimination included 21 formal complaints of discrimination. Of those complaints, 1.8 percent concerned religious discrimination. Of the 44.6 percent that were racial discrimination cases, 12 percent targeted Jews. The CHRXD and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs worked to develop and prepare the “System for the Monitoring of Recommendations,” a computer tool to monitor and report progress related to issues of discrimination. They expected to launch the system in 2018.

In March the Uruguayan Central Jewish Committee (CCIU) organized an academic event titled “Anti-discrimination Law – Hate Crimes” to mark the one year anniversary of the killing of Jewish businessman David Fremd by a Muslim convert. In October 2016 a court ruled the killer, Carlos Peralta, should be sent to a psychiatric center rather than prison. The event was sponsored by the Supreme

Court, the Attorney General's Office, and the Latin American Jewish Congress and was supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Minister Nin Novoa, who participated in the event.

The government organized workshops throughout the year to raise awareness of societal discrimination and to promote tolerance. Parliament established March 19 as the date to commemorate secularism in the country. An opposition party representative promoted this legislative initiative with the stated purpose of reinforcing secularism as the base of a "respectful coexistence" in society.

CHRXD sources said the government was not invited to any civil society-organized interfaith dialogues during the year. Religious leaders also noted that while the national government seemed to make little effort to convene an interfaith dialogue, local government officials in Montevideo provided support to interfaith events.

The country's commitment to secularism at times continued to generate tensions within the Catholic and evangelical Christian communities, who said government stances on sex education, gender, and abortion threatened their rights to practice their religion. Differing interpretations of the term "secularism" continued to lead to disagreements on the state's role in enforcing the country's secularism laws. In July the Secondary Education Council, a government agency within the National Public Education Administration, suspended the director of a public high school in the Department of Salto for allowing a workshop on sexuality and reproduction that included models of human fetuses and booklets with religious images. The suspension was purportedly due to the director's violation of secularism laws after religious materials were allowed into the classroom as part of the presentation. Afterward, a legislator filed a complaint in parliament against the director's suspension, stating the suspension was a violation of the same laws enforcing secularism. The complaint was pending at year's end. The incident engendered considerable nationwide controversy and debate about secularism in the country.

Minority religious groups such as Bahais, Umbandists, Buddhists, and Hindus reported no cases of government-based discrimination or intolerance. They continued, however, to state the government demonstrated more interest in other religious groups, particularly Christian and Jewish groups, and there were few to no opportunities for direct dialogue with the government on religious freedom during the year.

The Montevideo city authorities' denial in May of the Archbishop of Montevideo's request to install a statue of the Virgin Mary on a major public route engendered controversy between representatives of the Catholic Church and some politicians. A representative of the Catholic Church said the decision had generated tensions between local Catholics and the government, especially because in the past the local government had allowed the placement of other statues, including one of Confucius and one of the Umbandist deity Iemanya, along the same stretch of road.

The Muslim community continued to request space from the government in a public cemetery in Montevideo to practice its burial rites. The Egyptian Islamic Center of Uruguay formally requested a grant of land in a state cemetery, leading to debate among several political leaders in Montevideo. Some leaders said as a minority group, the Muslims should have government support to use public space for a cemetery; others opposed the idea, citing the local government's rejection of a request to place a statue of the Virgin Mary on public land, in addition to the potential risks of creating a precedent. The request was pending at year's end.

As in previous years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported activities to commemorate the Holocaust. The parliament organized a special session in January to honor Holocaust victims. Also in January, Minister of Education and Culture Maria Munoz issued a nationally broadcast message commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day. In her speech, she announced the naming of a Montevideo public high school after Warsaw Ghetto Uprising leader Mordechai Anielewicz. The "Shoa Project," an online educational tool on the Holocaust, launched a contest during the year for high school teachers to raise awareness of Holocaust resistance fighters.

In October Defense Minister Jorge Menendez met with representatives of the Uruguay Jewish Central Committee and the country's four main political parties to decide how to dispose of an 800-pound bronze Nazi eagle and swastika from a German World War II cruiser scuttled in Montevideo harbor following the 1939 Battle of Rio Plata. While a representative of the governing Broad Front coalition suggested displaying the piece in a future museum dedicated to the battle, CCIU President Israel Buszkaniec expressed concern the piece could attract neo-Nazis to the country and create a "Nazi sanctuary." At year's end no decision about the piece's disposition was made.

In December the government awarded a prize to a public school and its staff in Maldonado Department in recognition of their work in raising awareness of the

negative consequences of discrimination in all its forms, including religious discrimination.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Representatives of some minority religious groups, such as Bahais, Umbandists, Buddhists, and Hindus, stated that society's lack of knowledge and understanding of their religious beliefs sometimes led to acts of discrimination. Members of these groups also said they were negatively targeted for their religious beliefs, including through verbal attacks in public.

Civil society representatives, including representatives of Jewish organizations, reported continued comments and activities on the internet and social media sites disparaging their religious beliefs and practices. On May 12, anti-Semitic messages were posted online following a basketball game in which a Jewish organization's team was defeated; other social media posts alluded to Nazi experiments perpetrated during World War II.

The Zionist Organization of Uruguay presented the 2017 Jerusalem Prize to prominent national figures including government authorities and academics for their work to promote and defend the human rights of the Jewish people and encourage peaceful coexistence among persons of different beliefs.

In October unknown individuals vandalized the Holocaust Memorial in Montevideo with anti-Semitic graffiti twice in the same week. On both occasions, local authorities immediately removed the graffiti. Montevideo Mayor Daniel Martinez and city official Carlos Varela condemned the acts of vandalism, announced authorities would monitor the monument, and asked citizens to practice good sense, tolerance, and peace. There were also reports of anti-Semitic graffiti such as swastikas painted near bus stops.

The Jewish-Christian Council, together with Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and Anglicans, continued to organize interfaith conferences, seminars, and academic activities whose goal was promotion of interfaith tolerance and coexistence.

The IF, a group of representatives from different religions and spiritual expressions, including Brahma Kumaris, Mormons, Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and Bahais, continued to promote interfaith understanding and to foster respect for religious diversity through expanding opportunities for dialogue.

IF representatives said they sought greater dialogue and collaboration with other religious groups, in addition to engaging the national and local governments. The IF said the country enjoyed a “relatively high level of religious freedom” but expressed concern for what it called occasional incidents of discrimination.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials maintained regular contact with government entities, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the CHRXD, and the National Institute of Human Rights to discuss issues related to religious freedom. These included the need for government activities to support interfaith dialogue and the new law commemorating a national day of secularism. Embassy officials also requested information regarding specific acts of discrimination based on faith.

Embassy officials met throughout the year with religious leaders, including several minority religious groups, and with members of the IF to discuss areas of interfaith collaboration and hear concerns about faith-related issues, such as legal avenues to practice freely Muslim burial rituals, acts of vandalism related to religions, and tensions between the government and religious organizations.

In January the Ambassador participated in an International Holocaust Remembrance Day activity held in parliament. The Ambassador attended an event and promoted tolerance via social media to support the Days of Remembrance of Victims of the Holocaust organized by the Israeli community in April. In May the Ambassador met with the president of B’nai B’rith International to discuss the importance of religious freedom, tolerance, and respect for religious diversity. The Ambassador met in September with representatives from the American Jewish Committee to discuss acts of discrimination faced by Uruguay’s Jewish community, including anti-Semitic messages posted on social media.

Embassy officials participated in a July roundtable with representatives of several minority religious groups, including the Bahais, Umbandists, Buddhists, Hindus, and the Valdese Church to hear concerns regarding religious tolerance.

During the year embassy officials met with representatives from the Catholic Church, the Jewish faith, and the IF to discuss areas of interfaith collaboration and to hear their concerns on interfaith issues.

The embassy extensively utilized social media to highlight respect for religious diversity and tolerance, including in covering its July roundtable with minority

religion representatives, the commemoration of International Religious Freedom Day on October 27, and to feature regular participation by the Ambassador and other U.S. embassy officials in events promoting religious diversity and tolerance throughout the year.