

URUGUAY 2019 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and affirms the state does not support any particular religion. Legal statutes prohibit discrimination based on religion. In August media quoted Human Rights Secretary for the Presidential Office Nelson Villarreal stating his concerns about the increasing participation of evangelical Protestants in politics. Evangelical Protestant pastors and other members of several evangelical Protestant churches said they disapproved of the secretary's remarks, which they stated incited discrimination and hatred. The pastors said they requested the secretary retract his statements and asked then president Tabare Vazquez to take corrective measures against the secretary. In May a number of evangelical Protestant organizations, including Mision Vida para las Naciones Church (Life Mission for the Nations), filed a petition before the Organization of American States Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) for discrimination by the state based on religious grounds; the commission continued to review the petition through year's end. The government's official commitment to secularism continued to generate controversy between religious groups and political leaders. Religious organizations continued to underline the need for more channels of communication and opportunities for dialogue with the government to discuss issues related to religious freedom. In September a court upheld the desire expressed in the living will of a comatose Jehovah's Witness not to receive a blood transfusion because it contravened her religious beliefs. In July the Canelones Department government transferred land to the Islamic community to build its first cemetery in the country. Members of the Jewish community said the government should issue regulations to allow alternate university-level exam dates for students observing religious holidays, instead of leaving the decision to individual professors. The government supported several events commemorating the Holocaust, including one held in parliament, and broadcast a national message reaffirming the country's commitment to the defense of human rights and its condemnation of any act of terrorism and intolerance.

According to media, on March 8, protesters vandalized a Roman Catholic Church, stating their disagreement regarding the Catholic Church's position on abortion and birth control. Religious representatives continued to report press and social media commentary disparaging their religious beliefs and practices. Interfaith groups continued to promote interfaith dialogue, understanding, and coexistence in the country. In May the Catholic Church organized an event commemorating 100 years of the separation of church and state. The Zionist Organization of Uruguay

presented the 2019 Jerusalem Prize to Cardinal Daniel Sturla, Archbishop of Montevideo. The annual prize recognizes a prominent national figure, typically a representative from government or academia, for promoting and defending the human rights of Jews and encouraging peaceful coexistence among persons of different beliefs.

U.S. Embassy officials discussed issues regarding religious freedom and discrimination with representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Forms of Discrimination (CHRXD), and the National Human Rights Institute (INDDHH). Embassy officials met with Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim representatives, other minority religious groups, and the Board for Interfaith Dialogue to discuss interfaith collaboration and hear their concerns about challenges to religious freedom and tolerance. In November embassy staff coorganized a workshop on religious freedom convened by the Catholic University, with representatives of different religions, including minority religious groups. The embassy continued to use social media to highlight the importance of respect for religious diversity and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.4 million (2019 midyear estimate). According to a 2014 Pew Research Center survey, 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. Minority groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Valdese Church, Afro-Umbandists (who blend elements of Catholicism with animism and African and indigenous beliefs), Buddhists, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), Brahma Kumaris, and others. According to the survey, 0.3 percent of the population is Jewish, 0.1 percent Hindu, and 0.1 percent Muslim. Other estimates of the country's Jewish population range from 12,000 to 30,000, according to the Jewish Studies department of ORT University and the National Israel Council. Civil society experts estimate there are between 700 and 1,500 Muslims, mostly living near the border with Brazil.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and states, “The state does not support any particular religion.” The penal code prohibits discrimination based on religion.

A 2017 law calls for the annual commemoration of secularism in the country, held on March 19 since 2018.

The constitution accords the Catholic Church the right to ownership of all its churches built wholly or partly with previous state funding, with the exception of chapels dedicated for use as 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 organization 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 ministry routinely registers groups submitting the required paperwork. If approved, the group may request a property tax exemption from the taxing authority, usually the local government.

Each local government regulates the use of its public land for burials. Many departments (equivalent to states) allow burials, services, and rites of all religions in their public cemeteries. Public health regulations, however, require burial in a coffin.

The INDDHH, an autonomous branch of 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. These rulings include a recommendation on whether cases should receive a judicial or administrative hearing. Only the courts or the Ministry of Labor may sanction or fine for discrimination. The INDDHH and the CHRXD provide free legal services to complainants.

A correctional authority 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. In deference to its secular nature, the government does not refer to holidays by their Christian names; for example, Christmas is formally referred to as “Family Day” and Holy Week is widely referred to as “Tourism Week.” 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.

For religious workers to work in the country, they must provide certification from their church to confirm the identity of the 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 government’s official commitment to secularism and how it impacted religious groups continued to generate controversy between religious groups and political leaders. Differing interpretations of the term “secularism” continued to lead to disagreements on the state’s role in enforcing the country’s secularism laws. Several representatives of religious groups said government authorities often interpreted secularism as the absence of religion, rather than the coexistence of multiple religions or beliefs and the independence of religion from the state.

In August media reported Human Rights Secretary for the Presidential Office Villareal said he was “concerned about the increasing participation of members of evangelical churches in politics.” Pastors and members of several evangelical Protestant churches said the secretary must retract his remarks. Regarding the same issue, a group of evangelical Protestant churches published an open letter to the secretary, accusing him of discrimination and demanding he retract his remarks. They also wrote to then president Vazquez, requesting corrective action. An evangelical Protestant congressman of the National Party, Alvaro Dastugue, said to the press that the secretary’s comments incited hate. The secretary did not retract his comments, and then president Vazquez did not respond to the letter. In May, based on what they said were discriminatory incidents, including negative statements made in 2018 by government officials about evangelical churches, a number of evangelical organizations, among them Mision Vida para las Naciones Church, filed a petition before the IACHR, stating discrimination by the state

based on religious grounds. The IACHR continued to review the petition through year's end.

In September a court ruled against giving a blood transfusion to a Jehovah's Witness in a coma. The woman stated in her living will she did not want to receive treatments of this kind because of her religious beliefs. The medical institution caring for her respected the patient's request, but her relatives took the matter to the courts, requesting a judicial order for the medical institution to apply life-saving treatments.

In July the Canelones Department government formally transferred land to the Egyptian Center of Islamic Culture, enabling the center to build an Islamic cemetery. In 2018, responding to a request from the Muslim community, the Canelones government agreed to establish the country's first Islamic cemetery, with a total area of 27,000 square feet, to be located next to the public Soca Cemetery. According to media, the Canelones Department government also needed to revise public health regulations to allow Muslim burials without a coffin.

Representatives of the Muslim community reported that in public primary schools providing meals to children, meals respecting religious-based food restrictions were rarely made available.

Members of the Jewish community said the government should issue regulations to allow alternate university-level exam dates for students observing religious holidays instead of leaving the decision to individual professors.

Through June the CHRXD received two complaints related to discrimination based on religion. It received five complaints in 2018. The CHRXD did not provide details on the source or specific type of discrimination. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs managed the System for the Monitoring of Recommendations, an interagency, computer-based tool to monitor and report on human rights issues, including discrimination based on religion.

Some members of Catholic and evangelical Protestant groups said government approaches to sex education, gender, and abortion, as taught in public schools, threatened their freedom of speech and the right to practice their religion. According to some religious groups, government agencies, including CHRXD and INDDHH, did not prioritize discrimination based on religion, focusing instead on what the government considered other more "pressing" human rights concerns, such as the rights of persons with disabilities, Afro-descendants, the LGBT

community, women, incarcerated persons, and human rights violations committed by the state during the military dictatorship.

The government continued to organize workshops throughout the year to raise awareness of societal discrimination and promote tolerance. During annual Diversity Month observances in September, the government reiterated its commitment to strengthening antidiscrimination policies and promoting tolerance.

Religious organizations said they continued to welcome opportunities for direct dialogue with the government on religious freedom but said there were few or no formal channels of communication with the government to raise general concerns or discuss initiatives related to religious freedom. Religious leaders again stated that the national government did not take the initiative to convene an interfaith dialogue and suggested creating a government institution to address religious issues and act as a link between religious groups and the state would be helpful.

In June a judge ruled in favor of private parties who in 2006 found an 800-pound bronze Nazi eagle with a swastika under its talons from a German World War II cruiser scuttled in Montevideo harbor following the 1939 Battle of the River Plate. The judge ordered the state to sell the bronze piece and split the profits with the private parties. Initially, the Ministry of Defense planned to appeal this ruling, but in December press reported the parties reached an agreement according to which the piece can be auctioned only to either a museum, foundation, or government, and not to private collectors. This solution addressed the concerns of those opposing the sale – including the Ministry of Defense, German government, and Jewish community – that potential buyers would use it as a Nazi worship symbol.

As in previous years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported activities to commemorate the Holocaust, including high-level representation at events organized by the Jewish community. The government publicized religious organization statements and events on its official website. Parliament organized a special session in January to honor Holocaust victims. In January the government broadcast a national message commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day. Through this message, a representative of the Presidential Office reaffirmed the country's commitment to the defense of human rights and its condemnation of any act of terrorism and intolerance.

On May 2, national and local government officials, politicians, legislators, diplomats, and human rights activists attended the Jewish community's commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day organized by the Central Israeli

Committee (the country's umbrella Jewish organization). On November 12, government officials, politicians, and human rights activists attended the Central Israeli Committee's commemoration of the Night of Broken Glass (Kristallnacht). Several government officials and politicians posted their participation in the commemoration and emphasizing the need to remember and reflect and to foster tolerance and coexistence.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Media reported that during a march commemorating International Women's Day on March 8, masked women vandalized with red paint the Catholic Church of Our Lady of the Mount Carmel in Montevideo, reportedly in disagreement with the Catholic Church's position on abortion and birth control. Some protesters chanted "Church, trash, you represent the dictatorship" and "I knew it, I knew it, rapists are protected by the police," among other things. During the year, church authorities installed a fence around the church and requested police protection in response to the vandalism of the church occurring during the women's march in 2018. Police guarding the church filmed the assault but did not intervene. The Prosecutor's Office initiated an investigation based on this evidence, which continued through year's end.

Representatives of several religious communities, including Catholics, evangelical Protestants, Muslims, Brahma Kumaris, Unification Church, Methodists, and Church of Jesus Christ, among others, continued to express interest in including "objective" information about the different religions in the school curriculum.

Members of the Muslim community said it was occasionally difficult to convince private-sector employers to respect prayer times during work hours and to obtain permission to leave work early to attend Friday prayers.

Jewish representatives reported continued comments and activities in media and on social media sites disparaging their religious beliefs and practices, making anti-Semitic remarks, and denying the Holocaust occurred.

The Zionist Organization of Uruguay presented the 2019 Jerusalem Prize to Cardinal Daniel Sturla, Archbishop of Montevideo. The annual prize recognizes a prominent national figure, typically a representative from government or academia, for promoting and defending the human rights of Jews and encouraging peaceful coexistence among persons of different beliefs.

In May the Catholic Church organized an event entitled, “Views after 100 Years of Church/State Separation.” Speakers included a former minister of education, a historian, a lawyer, and Cardinal Sturla. Church authorities and a wide range of diplomats, legislators, politicians, civil society representatives, and government officials, including the human rights secretary for the Presidential Office, attended the event.

The Board for Interfaith Dialogue, a group of representatives from different religious groups and spiritual expressions, including Brahma Kumaris, the Church of Jesus Christ, Catholics, Jews, evangelical Protestants, and Baha’is, continued to promote interfaith understanding and foster respect for religious diversity through expanding opportunities for dialogue. During the year, the board organized forums open to the general public to promote religious freedom and human rights.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials discussed issues related to religious freedom and discrimination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the CHRXD, and the INDDHH. Embassy officials encouraged government representatives to engage in dialogue with all religious groups.

Embassy officials met during the year with religious leaders, including Catholics, Jews, evangelical Protestants, members of other minority religious groups, as well as subject matter experts, including academics, lawyers, and human rights experts, to discuss interfaith collaboration and hear concerns about faith-related issues. In November embassy staff organized and cosponsored a workshop on religious freedom convened by the Catholic University, with representatives of different religions, including minority religious groups, to discuss concerns regarding religious tolerance and religious freedom.

In January the Ambassador participated in the International Holocaust Remembrance Day activity held in parliament and posted on Twitter, “Let us keep in our hearts the memory of every man, woman, and child abused, tortured, and killed in the Shoah. Let us remember the victims, and Never Again.” In March an embassy official attended a memorial event for David Fremd, a Jewish businessman killed in 2017 in an anti-Semitic attack. In November a senior embassy official attended the annual commemoration of Kristallnacht.

The embassy used social media to highlight respect for religious diversity and tolerance, including during the July Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in

Washington, D.C. and to commemorate International Religious Freedom Day on October 27.