

BRAZIL 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The federal constitution states that freedom of conscience and belief is inviolable, and that free exercise of religious beliefs is guaranteed. In addition, the constitution prohibits federal, state, and local governments from either supporting or hindering any specific religion. A committee of the federal Senate held a public hearing on religious intolerance, focusing on the instances of violence against practitioners of African-originated religions. Some members of congress and religious leaders called for the creation of a congressional committee to investigate the violence.

According to the Secretariat of Human Rights (SDH), its hotline received 70 percent more calls about cases of religious intolerance, in some cases violent, than the previous year. Societal discrimination based on religious affiliation was most frequently directed at practitioners of African-originated religions.

U.S. embassy and consulate officials met with members of the National Committee for the Respect of Religious Diversity (CNRDR), which comprises members from various federal ministries, civil society organizations, and faith-based organizations. U.S. officials from Washington met with CNRDR leaders and interfaith communities to promote religious freedom and tolerance. The Department of State Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism visited Sao Paulo in April to meet with leaders of the Jewish and interfaith communities.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 204.3 million (July 2015 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 “mainstream” Protestant churches, and 22 percent belong 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). Atheists, agnostics, those who claim no religion, and those whose religion is unknown make up roughly 8 percent of the population.

Other groups, each constituting less than 1 percent of the population, include Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and African and syncretic religious groups

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such as Candomble and Umbanda. There are a small number of adherents of indigenous religious beliefs.

Assessments of the number of Muslims vary. According to the 2010 census, there are approximately 35,200 Muslims, while the Federation of Muslim Associations of Brazil states the number at approximately 1.5 million. Other observers estimate the number of Muslims to be between 400,000 and 500,000. There are significant numbers of Muslims in Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba, and Foz do Iguazu, as well as in smaller cities in the states of Parana and Rio Grande do Sul.

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 federal constitution states that freedom of conscience and belief is inviolable, and the free exercise of religious beliefs is guaranteed. 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 any individual who displays, distributes, or broadcasts religiously intolerant material. It is illegal to write, edit, publish, or sell literature that promotes religious intolerance.

Religious groups are free to establish places of worship, train clergy, and proselytize without being required to register, but groups seeking tax-exempt status must register with the Department of Federal Revenue and with the local municipality. States and municipalities have requirements and regulations for obtaining tax-exempt status. Most jurisdictions require groups to document the purpose of their congregation to ensure it is in line with the constitution, to provide an accounting of finances, and to have a fire inspection of any house of worship. Local zoning laws and noise ordinances may limit where a religious group can build houses of worship or hold ceremonies. A constitutional provision provides the right of access to religious services and counsel in all civil and military establishments.

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Public schools are required to offer religious instruction, but neither the constitution nor legislation defines the parameters. By law the instruction should be nondenominational and without proselytizing, with alternative instruction for students who do not want to participate. The law prohibits public subsidies to schools operated by religious organizations.

Members of African-originated religions must have access to religious professionals in hospitals, prisons, and other institutions.

Government Practices

In September the federal Senate's Committee of Human Rights held a public hearing on religious intolerance, focusing on instances of violence against practitioners of African-originated religions throughout the country. Some religious leaders and senators called for the creation of a congressional investigative committee to investigate these cases of violence. A government representative acknowledged the problem, and spoke of plans to improve national reporting on religious violence and to expand the network of permanent forums on interfaith dialogue existing in seven of the country's states.

In August the lower house of the national congress held a hearing on religious tolerance and interfaith dialogue with a panel comprising members of the National Committee for Religious Diversity, the SDH Coordinator for Religious Diversity, a Candomble priestess, the president of the National Council for Christian Churches, and the president of the Association of Evangelical Jurists. Members of the Catholic and Anglican Churches and some of the Bahai community were also present. The government representative described efforts to organize state forums on religious diversity and to create state-level committees on religious diversity.

In the state of Rio Grande do Sul, the Interfaith Dialogue Group of the city of Porto Alegre – with representatives from 10 religious groups – met with the secretary of justice to announce the creation of the first coordination office for religious diversity within the state government.

During a public hearing in June in Rio de Janeiro at the Brazilian Bar Association, the leadership of the Committee to Combat Religious Intolerance asked the government to create a national plan to combat religious intolerance. Government sources reported at the end of the year that a stand-alone national plan to combat religious intolerance was not yet in draft. They stated that

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government efforts were focused on an early 2016 release of a study on cases of religious discrimination, and on the development of a new Network for the Protection of Victims of Religious Intolerance.

Although religious instruction was optional, 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 domestic nonprofit organization providing information on education. Each school defined the religious curriculum, usually in agreement with parent councils. According to the SDH, 9 percent of all complaints of religious discrimination were related to incidents that took place in schools. The Ministry of Education and SDH developed workshops for teachers to address religious tolerance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The SDH announced that during the year, its Dial 100 hotline registered 252 reports of religious discrimination related to cases of religious intolerance, an increase of 70 percent from 2014. Between 2011 and 2015, the Dial 100 hotline received 756 reports of religious discrimination, including violence, against adherents of African-originated religions.

A report prepared by the Commission to Combat Religious Intolerance in Rio de Janeiro stated there were 39 complaints of religious intolerance reported to the SDH hotline from January to June. Rio de Janeiro State reported the greatest number of cases, followed by Sao Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Bahia. In Rio de Janeiro, 71 percent of the cases of religious intolerance were reported to be related to adherents of African-originated religions.

The Palmares Foundation, linked to the Ministry of Culture, reported it registered 218 reports of violent acts against places of worship for religions of African origin since it began collecting data in 2010.

In June two men attacked a group of Candomble followers as they were leaving a temple in Vila da Penha in northern Rio de Janeiro. The men shouted the Candomble followers “would burn in hell” and threw stones at the group. An 11-year-old adherent was struck in the head. As of the end of the year, the police had not identified the aggressors.

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In February a group of unidentified men broke into an Umbanda temple in Cachambi, North Rio, and destroyed religious images and statues. The person responsible for the temple reported that prior to the attack, neighbors threatened to damage the temple and adherents' vehicles. Police were still investigating the case and had not identified any suspects.

In September unknown assailants set fire to two Candomble temples near the border of Brasilia and the state of Goias, one in Santo Antonio do Descoberto and the other in Aguas Lindas. The temple in Santo Antonio was destroyed.

Civil society representatives and government officials stated that religious intolerance was often related to racism.

An article in BBC's online magazine explored the reasons behind what it saw as the Neo-Pentecostal movement's effort to demonize the practitioners of Umbanda and Candomble. A teacher in the article said the conflict was about contrasting religious beliefs and deep seated racism.

Several leaders of the Jewish and interfaith communities stated that overt anti-Semitism remained limited in the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials met with members of the CNRDR. The Department of State Special Envoy to Monitor and Combat Anti-Semitism visited Sao Paulo in April to meet with leaders in the Jewish and interfaith communities.

In February staff from the consulate general in Rio de Janeiro met with the president of the Commission to Combat Religious Intolerance in Rio de Janeiro, to discuss cases of intolerance and the growing number of complaints by groups of Brazilians of African descent concerning Neo-Pentecostal groups.

The Consul General in Sao Paulo hosted an iftar during Ramadan and invited members of the Muslim and interfaith communities to promote interfaith dialogue and tolerance.