

URUGUAY 2016 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. A poll by Pew Research Center reported 57 percent of inhabitants believed religious leaders should have “no influence at all” in political matters. A representative of a minority religious group stated the government gave greater attention to majority religious groups, particularly Christians and Jews, over minority groups. Religious leaders said they believed legislation should provide a special category for religious groups as part of civil society, as their activities went beyond those of civil associations. The government supported several activities to commemorate the Holocaust.

A Muslim convert, allegedly aligned with anti-Jewish movements, stabbed to death a member of the Jewish community in Paysandu and was indicted for murder and religious hatred. A psychiatric evaluation subsequently determined the man was not legally responsible for the crime because of his mental condition, and he was committed to a mental health hospital. The Central Jewish Committee reported it cooperated effectively with police investigations of anti-Semitism. Jewish organizations stated some parts of society still manifested anti-Semitic attitudes. Religious representatives expressed concern that society’s general lack of knowledge about their religious beliefs contributed to discriminatory behavior.

U.S. embassy officials met with representatives from various government institutions including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Forms of Discrimination of the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the National Institute of Human Rights to discuss issues related to religious freedom. Embassy officials met with religious leaders to discuss areas of interfaith collaboration, hear concerns on faith-related issues, and promote respect for religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.35 million (July 2016 estimate). The National Institute of Statistics data on religious preference from 2006, the most recent available, indicate approximately 47 percent of the population self-identifies as Roman Catholic, and approximately 11 percent as non-Catholic Christian. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the

population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Bahais, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Afro-Umbandists (who blend elements of Catholicism with animism and African and indigenous beliefs), Jews, Buddhists, members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), and Muslims. Approximately 23 percent of the population indicates a religious belief but no specific religious affiliation and 17 percent are atheist or agnostic.

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 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 that includes the organization's structure and objectives. The ministry examines the dossier and determines if the religious group is eligible to receive a tax exemption. Groups that submit the required paperwork are routinely registered. If approved, the group may request a property tax exemption from the taxing authority, usually the municipal government.

The National Institute of Human Rights, an autonomous branch of parliament, and the MEC's Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Forms of Discrimination enforce government compliance with antidiscrimination laws. Both organizations receive complaints of discrimination, conduct investigations, and issue rulings on whether discrimination occurred. The ruling recommends if the case should receive a judicial or administrative hearing. Only the courts or the Ministry of Labor, however, may sanction or fine for discrimination. The National Institute of Human Rights and the Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Forms of Discrimination provide free legal services to the complainant.

Religious instruction in public schools is prohibited by the constitution. Public schools are closed on major Christian holidays, though holidays are not officially referred to by their Christian names. Students belonging to non-Christian or minority religious groups may be absent from school on their religious holidays without penalty.

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

Government Practices

The National Institute of Human Rights reported 3.8 percent of the 26 discrimination complaints it received in 2015 (the most recent figures available) were based on religion, as compared with 6 percent in 2014. Out of a total of 314 human rights complaints, one was based on religious discrimination. The Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Forms of Discrimination reported it received no complaints of religious discrimination during the year; it reported nine complaints of religious discrimination since its inauguration in 2007. Representatives from religious and civil society groups were active participants in the Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Forms of Discrimination. A poll by Pew Research Center reported 57 percent of people in the country believed that religious leaders should have “no influence at all” in political matters.

In November Nicolas Jose Gonella was convicted of inciting racist, religious, and xenophobic hatred online. Gonella was found responsible for racist commentary and insults in 2013 in a blog against Mae Susana Andrade, a member of the Afro-Umbandist religion. The website, titled “Alerta Irreligion” (Unreligious Alert), allegedly disseminated hatred against Umbandists, Afro-Uruguayans, indigenous, and LGBTI individuals, and it personally targeted Andrade, calling her an “assassin witch.” The Ministry of Interior’s General Unit for Information and Intelligence received the complaint and coordinated with the Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Forms of Discrimination. Gonella was sentenced to 15 months in prison.

In December the Catholic Church led a campaign for followers to hang “Christmas with Jesus” flags outside their residences; approximately 28,500 did. The Uruguayan Association for Free Thinkers criticized President Tabare Vazquez for hanging a flag outside his home, saying he represented society and the state and therefore should not publicize his religion. Several public officials and constitutional law experts said the flag was hung from the president’s personal

home, not the official residence, and therefore was permissible and even to be encouraged as a demonstration of the country's respect for religious freedom.

A representative of one of the country's minority religious groups stated the government gave greater attention to larger religious groups, particularly Christian and Jewish groups, than to minority religious groups. They said that government leaders participated in Jewish and Christian public events during the year, but did not engage in similar public gestures of support for other groups, especially those with fewer members. Religious leaders said they believed legislation should provide a special category for religious groups as part of civil society, because their activities went beyond those of civil associations.

In January President Vazquez issued a message commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day, which was broadcast on national media networks. As in previous years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported activities to commemorate the Holocaust. The parliament during a special session honored those whose lives had been lost.

In May the government's Technology in Education program launched an online, interactive application called the "Shoa Project" on the memory and legacy of the Holocaust. The project served as an educational tool for high school teachers to teach history related to the Holocaust.

In June the government participated in the first Global Forum for Anti-Semitism in Latin America. The country's delegation included Minister of Education and Culture Muñoz, the president of the Chamber of Representatives, the president of the parliamentary Human Rights Committee, and a member of the National Institute of Human Rights.

In August the municipality of Montevideo presented a thematic tour that included visits to the origins of Jewish immigration to the country, including historical buildings and sites.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In March a member of the Jewish community, David Fremd, was stabbed to death in the streets of the city of Paysandu by Carlos Omar Peralta. Peralta, a Muslim convert with a police record for receiving stolen property, was reportedly aligned with anti-Jewish movements. Witnesses who saw the attack were able to apprehend Peralta and hold him until police arrived. A judge indicted him for

murder and religious hatred. A psychiatric evaluation stated he was not legally responsible for the crime because of his mental condition, and he was committed to a mental health facility. Law enforcement officers said the case was unusual and not linked to international criminal organizations. Representatives of the Jewish community said they appreciated the government's prompt reaction to the incident. After Fremd's death the Christian-Jewish Council (CJC) worked to promote interreligious dialogue in the interior of the country.

Muslim community representatives pointed to several issues that inhibited their religious practices, including the legal obligation to use coffins for burials, which contravenes Islamic practice. They also cited the discomfort some Muslim women felt wearing their hijabs in public because of societal censure.

Representatives of some minority religious groups expressed concern about society's lack of knowledge and understanding of their religious beliefs, which they said sometimes led to acts of discrimination. Members of these groups also stated they were negatively targeted for their religious beliefs, including through verbal public attacks. An Afro-Umbandist leader reported several instances of public discourse, particularly on the internet and social media, disparaging Afro-Umbandist religious beliefs and practices. Leaders of Jewish organizations also reported anti-Semitic statements on social media sites related to government political decisions concerning Israel.

According to Gideon Behar, Director of the Department for Combating Anti-Semitism of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there was a limited number of cases of anti-Semitic graffiti and of anti-Semitism on Uruguayan social media sites.

The CJC, whose Christian members include Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and Anglicans, held a series of gatherings on issues of shared interest with the aim of promoting interfaith understanding. In August and September the CJC organized a series of conferences about the separation of church and state to highlight secularism, exchange opinions, and promote respect for religious values. During the year, the Archbishop of Montevideo requested a religious statue be placed on a public sidewalk. The request, which was pending a decision at year's end, sparked public debate on the separation of church and state in the country.

The American Jewish Committee (AJC), through the Uruguayan Central Jewish Committee (CCIU), arranged a trip to Israel in July for a delegation that included members of parliament from various political parties. The leaders of the group

said the aim of the trip was to reduce prejudice in the country regarding Israel and the Jewish community, as well as to promote interreligious understanding and respect. The CCIU reported more effective cooperation with police investigating incidents of anti-Semitism following the trip.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials maintained regular contact with government institutions, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Forms of Discrimination, and the National Institute of Human Rights to discuss issues related to religious freedom. Embassy officials asked about the status of religious freedom in the country and requested information regarding specific acts of discrimination based on faith.

U.S. embassy officials met frequently with human rights organizations and leaders of religious groups to hear their concerns regarding religious tolerance and to emphasize the importance of religious freedom. In September the Ambassador met with representatives from the AJC and the CCIU to discuss anti-Semitism in Latin America and specifically in the country. In October the Ambassador met with local leaders of the Bnai Brith to discuss the state of the Jewish community and regional political issues impacting it. The Ambassador specifically asked about the impact of the killing of David Fremd on the Jewish community. During the year, embassy officials also met with representatives from the Islamic Cultural Center, the Catholic Church, the Afro-Umbandist faith, the Christian-Jewish Council, the Uruguayan Federation of Evangelical Churches, and the Interreligious Forum of Uruguay to discuss areas of interfaith collaboration, to hear their concerns on interfaith issues, and to promote respect for religious freedom.