

Religious Freedom in the Italian Republic

Executive Summary

(1) In the year 1946, Italy became a democratic republic replacing the previous monarchy. The constitution for this government promotes religious freedom. Furthermore, laws and policies reflect the efforts of the state to ensure free practice of religion. Up to the present, politicians in Italy work to combat abuses of religious freedom within the country. Many times the politicians are called to direct their attention specifically to the Muslim and Jewish population.

The Institute on Religion and Public Policy

(2) The Institute on Religion and Public Policy is an international, inter-religious non-profit organization that strives to guarantee religious freedom worldwide. Twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Institute supports all fundamental rights with an emphasis on religious freedom. The Institute works with many influential individuals such as scholars, business executives, policy makers, religious leaders, and non-governmental organizations in order to encourage the furthering of religious freedom in a cooperative way across the globe.

Legal Status

(3) As previously mentioned, Italy abides by a constitution in which religious freedom is upheld. Furthermore, other laws and policies contribute to the free practice of religion. Whether the government or a private group, the state does not allow their abuse of religious freedom. A state religion does not exist in Italy.

(4) Although a state religion does not exist, the Roman Catholic Church does have some privileges that other religions in this country do not hold. An example of these privileges is the selection of Catholic teachers to teach religion in public schools. These allowances result from the authority that the Roman Catholic Church held within Italy in the past. Often, the Roman Catholic Church interjects their thoughts on political issues into the Italian government. More recently, Italians have been rebuking the Vatican for interfering in the country's affairs.

(5) In 1984, Italy revised the concordat the state held with the Roman Catholic Church. The amendment of the concordat resulted in the declaration of the state as secular but ensured that religions would be supported by the state. An example of this can be seen in the way the government provides money for the construction of places of worship. Also, a provision has been made for accords between the government of Italy and all religions. The religion must pursue an accord in order to get support from the state. These accords can include the state giving money to that religion through the system of a voluntary check-off of taxpayer returns. Religions who have an accord with the government include, but

are not limited to, the Buddhist Union, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Confederation of Methodists.

Official and Societal Abuse and Discrimination

(6) Despite frequent attempts to promote religious freedom, some government officials do not strive to achieve this goal. The most prominent group who tends to not subscribe to religious freedom, specifically for Muslims, as well as abhor immigrants is the Northern League located in the north of Italy. Besides the Northern League, various politicians feel animosity towards certain religions as well as immigrants. One particular politician is former Minister Calderoli. Calderoli threatened to desecrate land in Bologna where a mosque was intended to be constructed. On September 13, 2007, after Calderoli made these statements, Social Affairs Minister Ferrero apologized for Calderoli's threats and subsequently requested respect for choice of religion in the country. But Calderoli did not stop there. Calderoli was seen wearing a t-shirt with cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad on it. These actions led Foreign Affairs Minister D'Alema to publicly condemn Calderoli's wardrobe choice on May 4, 2008.

(7) The Italian government has also begun to place restrictions on the wearing of religious garments in public. On July 31, 2005, the Italian parliament passed a counter-terrorism decree which effectively banned the wearing of a burqa. The rational for this decision rests upon the desire to ensure that no one can hide their identity. The punishment for wearing a burqa consists of either two years imprisonment or a fine up to €2,000. On June 15, 2007, a charter of shared values for citizenship and integration was published by the Italian government. In this charter, which is not legally binding, the government sets out guidelines for immigrants. One of these guidelines requires that individuals do not cover their faces with their garments.

(8) Mosque construction holds a place as a major issue pertaining to religious freedom in Italy. In September 2008, the Northern League pronounced a desire to limit the construction of mosques in Italy. The building of a mosque would have to meet strict regulations. These restrictions would cause the building of mosques to be limited to very few areas in the country. Prior to this proposition by the Northern League, the construction of a mosque in Bologna was suspended on April 29, 2008. Finally, during 2007, the monitoring of foreign funds for mosque construction was proposed by the government.

(9) Recently, bombs have been detonated near mosques in Italy. On February 1, 2008 in Salerno province, an explosive device was detonated near a mosque. Yet again, on February 3, 2008, a bomb damaged Via Quaranta in Milan near a mosque.

(10) In January 2009, a group of Muslims participated in a pro-Palestinian demonstration in Milan. The demonstrators ended the protest in prayer in front of

the central cathedral of Milan. This prompted Italy's Defense Minister to caution the Muslims against future aggravation of the community. Following these statements, Muslim leaders apologized to the Catholic archdiocese for any unintended disrespect.

(11) In January 2009, an Italian Trade union called for a boycott of Jewish goods in Rome. The union promoted this boycott in protest against the Israeli bombing of the Gaza Strip. Italian politicians from both sides of the spectrum as well as the main Italian trade unions and the Jewish community condemned the trade union for their proposal.

(12) The issue of religious symbols in public has also found a place as a main issue. In 2006, religious symbols in public buildings were ruled acceptable by the Council of State. The rational behind this decision rests upon the sentiment that the religious symbols exemplify the civil values of the country. Despite this ruling, individuals throughout the country have criticized the allowance of religious symbols in the public arena. On February 7, 2007, the former Italian Justice Minister proclaimed that traditional Italian culture is symbolized through the crucifix. Therefore, due to the crucifix's symbolism of Italian culture, the former Justice Minister believed that this religious symbol could be displayed in a public place. Despite many prominent individuals or government groups ruling that religious symbols are allowed in public areas, some individuals stand strong against these verdicts. For example, in February 2008, a judge received one year of jail time due to his refusal to rule over a courtroom in 2006. The judge refused to work in the courtroom because a crucifix was on display in the room.

US Government Policy

(13) The US embassy in Italy promotes human rights in the country. Outreach programs for the Islamic community have been implemented by the embassy. Also, the State Department Global Anti-Semitism Report was presented to Italian politicians by the embassy with the help of representatives from the Jewish community. The embassy continues to monitor discrimination and infringement of human rights. Furthermore, religious groups throughout the country have contact with the embassy.

Conclusion

(14) The Italian politicians have been making great steps towards ensuring complete religious freedom for the country of Italy. Through the defense of various religions under fire for their religious beliefs, a fair number of politicians have shown their desire for greater religious tolerance in the country. Currently, most of the religious freedom issues involve the acceptance of new religions into the Catholic-dominated society. Distaste for immigrants has already singled out new citizens but their religions have painted an even more visible target on their backs. To combat this situation, acceptance of new individuals into society

despite their religion and cultural background needs to be promoted. Furthermore, communication between the religions of the country needs to occur in order to encourage understanding and acceptance.