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## Argentina

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2010**

**November 17, 2010**

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The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; however, prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 1,068,302 square miles and a population of 37 million, according to the 2001 census. A 2010 projection of the population is 41.3 million. Accurate estimates of religious affiliation are difficult to obtain due to legal prohibitions on including religion in the census; however, data from a study conducted by the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET) and the National Agency for the Promotion of Science and Technology (FONCyT), released in 2008, produced the following estimates: Roman Catholics, 76 percent of the population; agnostics or atheists, 11 percent; and Pentecostals, 8 percent. Baptists, Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Methodists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists, and adherents of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God total less than 5 percent of the population.

The Islamic Center estimates that one of every three Middle Eastern immigrants is Muslim. Descendants of Syrian and Lebanese immigrants, approximately half of whom are Orthodox Catholic or Maronite, constitute a significant portion of the population with Middle Eastern roots. The Muslim community is composed of 400,000 to 500,000 members, of whom 60 percent are Sunni; 30 percent Shi'ite; and 10 percent Alawi, a branch of Shi'a Islam.

Leaders of diverse religious groups noted the recent growth of evangelical Protestant communities due to conversion, principally in newer evangelical churches. Religious leaders also noted the effect of global secularization on religious demography.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and its partial amendments provide for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The constitution grants all residents the right "to profess their faith freely" and states that foreigners enjoy all the civil rights of citizens. The law provides the legal framework for religious freedom.

By constitutional and legal obligation, the government "sustains the apostolic Roman Catholic faith" and provides tax-exempt subsidies to the Catholic Church to compensate for expropriation of church property in the colonial era. The Catholic Church enjoys institutional privileges such as school subsidies, a large degree of autonomy for parochial schools, and licensing preferences for radio frequencies.

The Secretariat of Worship is responsible for conducting the government's relations with religious organizations. On November 25, 2009, the Secretariat of Worship, with the Argentine Council for Religious Freedom and representatives of the "Religious Values" (Valores Religiosos) newspaper supplement, observed Religious Freedom Day in recognition of UN resolution 36/55 of 1981. The Secretariat of Worship also sought to promote religious harmony by sending official representatives to events such as religious freedom conferences, rabbinical ordinations, Rosh Hashannah and Eid al-Fitr celebrations, and religious activities held by Protestant and Orthodox churches. On May 25, 2010, President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner invited leaders representing several religious groups to celebrate the government's official ceremony for the 200th anniversary of the May Revolution in an interfaith celebration in Buenos Aires. In addition, President Fernandez de Kirchner met with Catholic Church prelates, Jewish and Muslim groups, and other religious leaders several times during the reporting period.

Both the federal government and the government of the Province of Buenos Aires promoted multilateral dialogue with diverse sectors of the community, including religious representatives. For instance, the National Consultative Council for Social Policies met weekly under the coordination of the national minister of social welfare, gathering representatives of labor and business groups, government, religious and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and unemployment associations.

The country is an active member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research. As part of its work with the task force, the government held an annual event to remember victims of the Holocaust. Speakers at the February 1, 2010, event included several cabinet ministers, the president of the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA), as well as Holocaust survivor Rosa Rotenberg.

The National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Racism (INADI), a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, is charged with promoting social and cultural pluralism and combating discriminatory attitudes. INADI, whose board includes representatives of the major religious groups, investigates violations of a law that prohibits discrimination based on "race, religion, nationality, ideology, political opinion, gender, economic position, social class, or physical characteristics." The agency also conducts educational programs, supports victims of discrimination, and promotes proactive measures to prevent discrimination. For example, INADI's religious freedom forum holds monthly meetings with leaders across the religious spectrum.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and Christmas. The law authorizes seven days of paid leave for those observing the Jewish holy days of New Year, the Days of Atonement, and Passover, and also for those observing the religious celebrations of the Islamic New Year.

By law a non-Catholic religious organization must register with the Secretariat of Worship as a civic rather than religious association and must report periodically to maintain its status. The Secretariat of Worship considered having a place of worship, an organizational charter, and an ordained clergy as criteria for registration. Registration was not required for private religious services such as in homes but was necessary for public activities. Registration was necessary to obtain tax-exempt status. According to the Secretariat of Worship, 3,650 religious groups were registered, including 413 Catholic groups. Of the non-Catholic groups, 90 percent were Protestant.

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Foreign missionaries of registered religious organizations may apply to the Secretariat of Worship, which in turn notifies immigration authorities to request issuance of the appropriate documents.

Public education is secular; however, students may request instruction in the religion of their choice, which may be conducted in school or at a religious institution. Many churches, synagogues, and mosques operated private schools, including seminaries and universities.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

#### Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice; however, prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

DAIA maintains a database tracking anti-Semitic incidents. The most commonly reported incidents were desecration of Jewish cemeteries, anti-Semitic graffiti, verbal slurs, and other forms of harassment. DAIA officials highlighted a trend toward harassment through Internet venues, such as blogs, and physical attacks against Jews. On May 27, 2010, the Federal Chamber of San Martín, Buenos Aires Province, confirmed the indictment of two persons detained while painting a swastika in Chacarita cemetery. One of the detainees operated a blog with Nazi and other anti-Semitic content. Both persons were charged under an antidiscrimination law, which carries a sentence of up to three years in prison.

According to DAIA, the government quickly responded to general incidents of anti-Semitism, such as desecration of a cemetery. However, DAIA believed that the government responded slowly to incidents related to political issues, such as the travel of labor union leader Luis D'Elia to Iran in 2009 and his meeting with Mohsen Rabbani, a suspect in the Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Association (AMIA) bombing.

The international investigation continued into the 1994 bombing of the AMIA building in Buenos Aires that killed 85 persons. In 2007, by request of the attorney general, Interpol submitted an official extradition request to Iran for five Iranian suspects in the bombing currently in Iran. Iran rejected the request, and March 2010 negotiations hosted by Interpol between Iran and Argentina failed.

A judge sentenced Juan Carlos Beica, the leader of a minority left-wing party, to a six-month suspended sentence for his role in organizing the January 2009 anti-Israeli demonstrations in Buenos Aires in protest of Israeli military operations in Gaza. The protests exploited anti-Semitic imagery outside the Israeli embassy, AMIA's headquarters, and a hotel owned

by a Jewish Argentine businessman and treasurer of the World Jewish Congress. At the end of the reporting period, the sentence was being appealed.

#### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officers met periodically with various religious leaders to discuss religious freedom and incidents of religious discrimination in the country. U.S. embassy officers attended events organized by faith-based organizations and NGOs that addressed religious freedom. The U.S. embassy also supported a program to build understanding among youth from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities, including outreach to educators and law enforcement officials to enhance their understanding of different religious practices.

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