



Argentina

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

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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 2008 estimate of the population is 40.7 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) produced the following estimates: Roman Catholics, 76 percent of the population; agnostics or atheists, 11 percent; and Pentecostals, 8 percent. Baptists, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Methodists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Muslims, Seventh-day Adventists, and adherents of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God total fewer 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 500,000 to 600,000 members, of whom 70 percent are Sunni and 30 percent Shi'ite, according to estimates by the Sunni-dominated Islamic Center.

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 impact 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. Law 21.745 of 1978, as modified by decree 2037/79 of 1979 and resolution 167/97 of 1997, provides the legal framework for religious freedom.

By constitutional and legal obligation, the Government "sustains the apostolic Roman Catholic faith" and provides a variety of unique subsidies to the Catholic Church to compensate for expropriation of church property in the colonial era. According to the Stewardship Council of the Argentine Catholic Bishops' Conference, in 2008 subsidies to the Catholic Church were approximately \$4.75 million (ARS 18,100,000) and represented approximately 0.01 percent of the national budget. The stipends are exempt from the equivalent of income tax, social security, and Medicare. The Catholic Church also enjoys institutional privileges such as school subsidies, a large degree of autonomy for parochial schools, and licensing preferences for radio frequencies. Catholic organizations must register with the Registry of Institutions of Consecrated Life in the Secretariat of Worship in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade, and Worship, which officially recognizes approximately 500 Catholic organizations.

The Secretariat of Worship is responsible for conducting the Government's relations with religious organizations. On November 24, 2008, the Secretariat of Worship, with the national Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, and the City of Buenos Aires Ministry of Education, observed Religious Freedom Day in recognition of U.N. 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 Hashana and Eid al-Fitr celebrations, and religious activities held by Protestant and Orthodox churches. On May 25, 2009, President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner invited leaders representing several religious groups to celebrate the Government's official ceremony for the 199th anniversary of the May Revolution in an interfaith celebration in Misiones. In addition, President Fernandez de Kirchner met with Catholic Church prelates, Jewish groups, and other religious leaders several times during the reporting period.

Both the Federal Government and the government of the Province of Buenos Aires promote multilateral dialogue with diverse sectors of the community, including religious representatives. For instance, the National Consultative Council for Social Policies meets weekly under the coordination of the National Minister of Social Welfare, gathering representatives of labor and business groups, government, religious and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and unemployment associations.

The Government observes Good Friday, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, and Christmas as national holidays. 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.

Legal status is a key concern for religious groups. 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. On average, the registration process takes six months. The Secretariat of Worship considers the following criteria: having a place of worship, an organizational charter, and an ordained clergy. Registration is not required for private religious services such as in homes but is necessary for public activities. Some long-established religious groups value this system, while other religious groups find it discriminatory. Registration is also necessary to obtain tax-exempt status. According to the Secretariat of Worship, more than 4,000 religious groups are registered, more than 90 percent of which are Protestant groups.

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. There were no reports that foreign missionaries were denied visas.

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. INADI also sponsored 18 events advocating religious freedom during the reporting period.

In February 2009 the Government ordered Richard Williamson, a British traditionalist Catholic and bishop of the Society of St. Pius X, to leave the country or face expulsion after his views denying the full extent of the Holocaust provoked public outcry. In its explanation of the decision, the Government cited document irregularities in Williamson's 2003 visa application. The Vatican, which in January 2009 lifted a 1988 excommunication order against Williamson, declared he would have to publicly retract his remarks before he could resume ecclesiastical duties.

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 operate 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 detainees or prisoners in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States or who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government continued to foster, sponsor, and participate in interfaith dialogues, including high-profile events such as Religious Freedom Day in November 2008. The country is an active member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

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.

The Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA) maintains a database tracking anti-Semitic incidents and reported that the number of incidents in 2008 sharply decreased. In 2008 DAIA registered approximately 202 complaints, a decrease of 178 incidents from 2007. The most commonly reported incidents were desecration of Jewish cemeteries, anti-Semitic graffiti, verbal slurs, and other forms of harassment.

In May 2009 approximately 20 Argentine members of the Revolutionary Action Front carrying weapons and a banner with the words "Israel, genocide" attacked the participants of a commemoration held by the city of Buenos Aires celebrating the 61st anniversary of the creation of the Jewish state. The authorities arrested nine persons who

remained in pretrial detention at the end of the reporting period.

The international investigation continued into the 1994 bombing of the Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Association (AMIA) building in Buenos Aires that killed 85 persons. In May 2008 a federal prosecutor called for the indictment of former President Carlos Menem, former federal judge Juan Galeano, and others for their alleged roles in covering up and protecting those involved in the attack. Subsequently, the presiding federal judge, following recommendations from the AMIA Special Prosecutor, issued an international request for the seizure of assets belonging to eight Iranians and Hezbollah members to cover damages being claimed in the civil suit brought against the perpetrators. In December 2008 the judge ordered the seizure of six commercial properties allegedly belonging to a former Iranian cultural attaché who was among those accused of aiding the attack, and in March 2009 the judge seized another five commercial properties in the Province of Buenos Aires.

In January 2009 leftist organizations staged anti-Israeli demonstrations exploiting anti-Semitic imagery outside the Israeli Embassy, the headquarters of the AMIA, and a hotel owned by a Jewish Argentine businessman and treasurer of the World Jewish Congress to protest Israeli military operations in Gaza. While INADI acknowledged the protesters' right to free speech, it condemned the use of anti-Semitic imagery and lodged a criminal complaint over the discriminatory graffiti and banner used during the protests.

In August 2008 a court sentenced Raul Arenas Vega to nine months in prison for the 2006 beating of an Orthodox Jewish teenager in Buenos Aires.

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 and attended events organized by faith-based organizations and NGOs that addressed religious freedom. The U.S. Embassy also supports a program to build understanding among youth from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities. Outreach to educators and law enforcement officials to enhance their understanding of and respect for different religious practices is an element of this project.