



## Argentina

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

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 period covered by this report.

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 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 polling conducted by the National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Racism (INADI) from December 2006 to March 2008 produced the following estimates: Roman Catholics, 76 percent of the population; agnostics or atheists, 12 percent; evangelical Protestants, 6 percent; Jews, 1 percent; Jehovah's Witnesses, 1 percent; other Protestants and Muslims, less than 1 percent; other religious groups (including Seventh-day Adventists, Buddhists, and some African and indigenous religions), 1.5 percent; and no declared religious affiliation, 1.2 percent. The INADI-sponsored polls indicate the following strength of religious affiliation: very observant/practicing, 7 percent; somewhat observant, 16 percent; a little observant, 23 percent; non-practicing/believer, 54 percent. Accuracy of estimates are impacted by outdated census data, questionable presumptions and, according to INADI, inaccuracy caused by African and indigenous religious followers experiencing societal pressure to declare themselves Roman Catholic in polls.

The Islamic Center estimates that one out of three Middle Eastern immigrants is Muslim. Syrian and Lebanese descendents, approximately half of whom are Orthodox Catholic or Maronite, constitute a significant portion of the Middle Eastern population. The Muslim community is comprised of 500,000 to 600,000 members, of whom 70 percent are Sunni and 30 percent Shiite, 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 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 law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors. 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. In 2007 subsidies to Catholic clergy amounted to more than \$5 million (ARS\$16,585,752), according to the National Registry of Worship. 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.

The Secretariat of Worship in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade, and Worship (MFA) is responsible for conducting the Government's relations with religious organizations. On November 24, 2007, 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, 2008, President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner invited leaders representing several religious groups to celebrate the Government's official ceremony for the 198th anniversary of the May Revolution in an interfaith celebration in Salta. This service marked the first participation of non-Catholic religious leaders in the official celebration. 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, in 2002 the Government established the National Consultative Council for Social Policies and in 2005 expanded its mandate. The Council meets 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 Government observes Good Friday, the Immaculate Conception, and Christmas as national holidays. The law authorizes 7 days of paid leave, rather than 3, 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. In February 2008 the Government recognized an African holy day for the first time.

Legal status is a key concern for religious groups. Under current law, a 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 for 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 historic religious groups value this system while other religious groups find the system discriminatory. Registration is also necessary to obtain tax-exempt status.

In early 2008 Vice-President Cobos, president of the Senate, met with leaders from the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA) and agreed to urge reform of Law 23.592, the Antidiscrimination Law of September 1988, which enumerates vulnerable minority groups. DAIA anticipates presenting its annual report on anti-Semitism and discrimination in the country before the Senate in August 2008.

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.

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 1988 law that prohibits discrimination based on "race,

religion, nationality, ideology, political opinion, sex, 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, in March 2007 INADI created a religious freedom forum that holds monthly meetings with leaders across the religious spectrum. INADI also sponsored three workshops and two public acts during the reporting period advocating religious freedom.

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 period covered by this report.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees 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 of the refusal to allow such citizens 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 the religious freedom conference in April 2008 and Religious Freedom Day in November 2007. The number of anti-Semitic incidents recorded by DAIA sharply decreased. The country is an active member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

### **Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

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. INADI-sponsored polling in 15 provinces and the capital revealed that nearly 4 percent of respondents believed they had suffered discrimination due to their religion and nearly 5 percent believed they had witnessed discrimination against another person based on religion. The same INADI-sponsored polls indicated that more than 11 percent of respondents believed Jews suffered religious discrimination nationally and more than 7 percent believed Jews suffered discrimination locally; 2.5 percent of respondents believed Muslims suffered discrimination nationally and 1.5 percent believed Muslims suffered discrimination locally. INADI also noted that African and indigenous religious followers reported societal pressure to declare themselves Roman Catholic in polls.

DAIA maintains a database tracking anti-Semitic incidents. In 2007 DAIA registered approximately 380 complaints, a decrease of 200 incidents from 2006. DAIA attributed the decrease to the absence of sustained armed conflict in or with Israel during 2007. According to the Israeli Foreign Ministry's coordination forum for countering anti-Semitism, the most commonly reported incidents were desecration of Jewish cemeteries, anti-Semitic graffiti, verbal slurs, and other forms of harassment.

The international investigation continued into the 1994 bombing of the Argentine Jewish Mutual Aid Association (AMIA) building in Buenos Aires that killed 85 persons. Prosecutor Alberto Nisman called for the indictment of former President Carlos Menem, former federal judge Juan Galeano, and others for their alleged role in covering up and protecting the "local connection" involved in the attack.

On April 28 to 29, 2008, the Argentine Council for Religious Freedom (CALIR) hosted an international conference entitled "Religious Freedom: the Root of All Freedoms" in Buenos Aires. Both the national and city governments participated, as well as representatives from diverse religious communities.

#### **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.

Released on September 19, 2008

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)



Published by the U.S. Department of State Website at <http://www.state.gov> maintained by the Bureau of Public Affairs.