

ARGENTINA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, and in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were some reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and some reports of anti-Semitism.

U.S. embassy officers regularly discussed religious freedom with community leaders as well as the government. The embassy also supported a program to promote interfaith dialogue and religious understanding among youth, educators, and law enforcement officials.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2010 census of the National Institute of Statistics and Census, the population is approximately 40.1 million. A 2008 study by the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research and the National Agency for the Promotion of Science and Technology estimates Roman Catholics constitute 76 percent of the population, and Baptists, Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Methodists, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) each total less than 5 percent of the population. Leaders of diverse religious groups note the recent growth of evangelical Protestant communities. While exact numbers are difficult to confirm (and national census data does not track religious affiliation), the Jewish population is approximately 250,000-300,000, generally considered the largest Jewish population in Latin America. Similarly, the Muslim population, an estimated 400,000 to 1 million, is also the largest in Latin America.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution, its partial amendments, and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution grants all residents the right "to profess their faith freely." The law provides the legal framework for religious freedom.

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By law, 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 receives institutional privileges such as school subsidies, significant autonomy for parochial schools, and licensing preferences for radio frequencies.

The Secretariat of Worship conducts the government’s relations with religious groups. The law stipulates a non-Catholic religious group 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 considers having a place of worship, an organizational charter, and an ordained clergy as criteria for registration. Registration is not required for private religious services, such as those in homes, but is necessary for public activities. Registration is necessary to obtain tax-exempt status. According to the latest data from the Secretariat of Worship, there are 4,580 registered religious entities, 90 percent of which are Protestant.

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

The government is a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

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 Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Passover, as well as for the Islamic New Year.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

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The federal government and the city of Buenos Aires conducted regular meetings with representatives of religious groups.

On November 22, the Buenos Aires city government, the Argentine Council for Religious Freedom, and the national Secretariat of Worship observed Religious Freedom Day during ceremonies in Buenos Aires. The Buenos Aires Directorate General for Religious Affairs and the national Secretariat of Worship sent official representatives to religious freedom conferences, rabbinical ordinations, Rosh Hashanah and Eid al-Fitr celebrations, and religious activities Protestant and Orthodox churches held.

The National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Racism (INADI), a government agency under the jurisdiction of the justice ministry, whose board includes representatives of the major religious groups, investigated violations of a law that prohibits discrimination based on religion and other factors. The agency also supported victims of discrimination and promoted proactive measures to prevent discrimination. INADI's religious freedom forum held monthly meetings with leaders across the religious spectrum.

The international investigation of the 1994 bombing of the Jewish Argentine Mutual Aid Association (AMIA) building in Buenos Aires that killed 85 persons continued. With Interpol assistance, the federal prosecutor investigating the case continued to seek the arrest of eight Iranians for their alleged involvement in the bombing. In September the government initiated a formal dialogue with the government of Iran, which it said was narrowly focused on securing justice for the AMIA case. Jewish community leaders criticized the government for "conducting a political dialogue with an untrustworthy partner" while the judicial process continued.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA) maintained a database of anti-Semitic incidents. The DAIA received 263 complaints of anti-Semitism during 2011, the most recent data available, representing a 4 percent decrease compared with 2010. The most commonly reported incidents were desecration of Jewish cemeteries, anti-Semitic graffiti, verbal slurs, and other forms of

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harassment. Jewish groups noted that anti-Semitic incidents tended to increase when violence erupted in Israeli-Palestinian relations. In January a pro-government newspaper published an anti-Semitic cartoon that belittled the tragedy and human suffering of the Holocaust; some Jewish community leaders sharply condemned the paper for promoting stereotypes and allowing the cartoon to be published. Islamic leaders complained that Muslims were often portrayed as terrorists in local media.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy representatives met periodically with religious leaders to discuss religious freedom and incidents of religious discrimination. In meetings with government officials, embassy staff discussed the status of the AMIA case, as well as governmental efforts to advance religious freedom.

In November the U. S. special representative to Muslim communities met with Muslim, Jewish, and community leaders in Buenos Aires and Cordoba. Community leaders welcomed the special representative's vision of engaging and empowering Muslim youth through such programs as the Hours Against Hate Campaign.

Embassy representatives attended events organized by religious groups and nongovernmental organizations that addressed religious freedom and promoted interfaith awareness and appreciation. One example was the Islamic Center of Argentina's Feast of Sacrifice celebration.

The embassy continued to support 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.