



Bolivia

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. Under a new Constitution promulgated February 7, 2009, the state is independent from religion, and Roman Catholicism is no longer the official state religion.

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. The Government occasionally criticized religious groups and others that it believed had commented on political matters.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

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 424,164 square miles and a population of 9.5 million. According to a 2001 survey conducted by the National Statistical Institute, 78 percent of the population is Catholic, 16 percent Protestant or evangelical, 3 percent follow other religions of Christian origin, 2.5 percent practice no religion, and less than 0.2 percent claim affiliation with non-Christian faiths, including Islam, the Baha'i Faith, Judaism, Buddhism, and Shinto. Of those who habitually practice their religion, 56.5 percent are Catholic, 36.5 percent Protestant or evangelical, and 7 percent belong to other Christian groups. In urban areas, 80 percent of the population is Catholic, while 14 percent is Protestant or evangelical. In rural areas, 74 percent of the population is Catholic, while 20.5 percent is Protestant or evangelical.

Approximately 55 percent of the population identifies itself as indigenous: 29 percent Quechua, 24 percent Aymara, 1 percent Chiquitano, and 1 percent Guaraní. Several other indigenous groups are present, although none represents more than 0.5 percent of the population. An estimated 30 percent of the population identifies itself as mestizo (of mixed indigenous and European ancestry) and 15 percent as white. Percentages vary significantly based on the definition used and sociopolitical factors. For example, according to a 2009 poll conducted by the Bolivian Foundation for Multiparty Democracy, as much as 60 percent of the population identifies itself as mestizo.

The indigenous population is higher in rural areas, where the formal Catholic Church tends to be weaker due to a lack of resources and to indigenous cultural resistance to church efforts to replace traditional attitudes with more orthodox Catholic practices and beliefs. For many individuals, identification with Catholicism for centuries has coexisted with attachment to traditional beliefs and rituals, with a focus on the Pachamama or Mother Earth figure, and on Ekeko, a traditional indigenous god of luck, harvests, and general abundance, whose festival is celebrated widely on January 24.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) estimates membership in the Mormon Church at

approximately 153,000. Mormons are present throughout the country and have a particularly large presence in Cochabamba, where their temple is one of the largest in the world. The approximately 650-member Jewish community is spread throughout the country and has synagogues in La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz. There are an estimated 1,000 Muslims, both converts and immigrants. Muslims have cultural centers that also serve as mosques in La Paz, Santa Cruz, and Cochabamba, predominantly for Sunni Muslims. Shi'a Muslims have a small but growing community in La Paz. Korean immigrants have their own Christian church in La Paz and founded a university with evangelical and Presbyterian ties in Santa Cruz. There are Buddhist and Shinto communities throughout the country as well as a substantial Baha'i community.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. According to article 4 of the new Constitution promulgated on February 7, 2009, "The state respects and guarantees religious liberty and spiritual beliefs, in accordance with its worldview (cosmovisiones). The state is independent from religion."

Written agreements between the Government and the Catholic Church formalized the Catholic Church's support in areas of education, health, and social welfare. Although the Government provided the Catholic Church with limited financial support, the Church's expenditures to provide these services, which otherwise would be the responsibility of the Government, significantly exceeded this support. Government and Catholic leaders expected that these written agreements would remain in force at least until the new Constitution had fully entered into force, in 2010, and until current contracts expired.

The Catholic Church exercised a limited degree of political influence through the Catholic Bishops' Conference. In September 2008 prefects (governors) of four eastern states requested that Cardinal Terrazas and other church leaders act as guarantors of negotiations with President Morales. In the past, governments sometimes requested that the Catholic Church arbitrate political disagreements.

The Government observes Good Friday, Corpus Christi, All Souls' Day, and Christmas as national holidays.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including non-Catholic religious organizations and missionary groups, seeking to acquire legal representation must register with the Governor's Office of their respective departments (state equivalents) to receive authorization. Nonprofit religious organizations and missionary groups must then register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Office of the Director of Religion to receive recognition as religious associations; however, the Director's office has no enforcement mechanism. An estimated 380 religious organizations are registered with the Office of the Director of Religion; in 2008 approximately 30 new groups applied for registration. Registered religious organizations receive tax exemptions. A religious organization that fails to submit an annual report to the Director of Religion for two consecutive years is removed from the registry, but the organization is notified prior to removal.

There were no reports that the Government restricted gatherings of nonregistered religious groups, but registration is essential to obtain tax, customs, and other legal benefits. The Ministry may not deny legal recognition to any organization based on its articles of faith and does not charge a fee for registration; however, the procedure typically requires legal assistance and can be time-consuming. Some groups have forgone official registration and operate informally. Religious groups receiving funds from abroad may enter into a framework agreement with the Government for three years that permits them to enjoy judicial standing similar to that of other NGOs and have tax-free status.

Some public schools provide Catholic religious instruction. By law, it is optional and curriculum materials describe it as such. Students face some peer pressure to participate, although this pressure has declined in recent years. Non-Catholic religious instruction is not available in public schools for students of other religious groups.

The Government did not take an active role in promoting interfaith understanding, although it was represented at interfaith meetings. It worked with Catholic, Protestant, and Mormon organizations on social, health, and educational programs.

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. President Morales occasionally objected to what he characterized as the Catholic Church espousing an overtly political role in state affairs, referring to the Church as his "enemy." The Government demanded that Cardinal Terrazas and the Catholic Church cease making what it characterized as political statements. On December 11, 2008, the Catholic Bishops' Conference stated that it rejected President Morales' "authoritarianism and abuse of power." On October 23, 2008, in its annual report to the Vatican, the Catholic international charitable organization Aid to the Church in Need cited the country as one where religious persecution occurred, noting the Government's disagreements with the Catholic Church and President Morales' statements identifying the Church as a supporter of domination and oligarchy over five centuries. However, President Morales' comments did not lead to restrictions on religious freedom in practice.

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.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Leaders from Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i, Catholic, and indigenous communities continued to hold interfaith meetings throughout the reporting period. Although some friction existed between supporters of indigenous religious groups and the Catholic Church, this was not perceived by the Church as discrimination.

On April 15, 2009, a bomb exploded at Cardinal Terrazas' official residence, destroying the entryway. The Cardinal was not at home, and no one was injured. The Government denounced the attack. Members of the Government and the opposition blamed each other for the bombing. The motivation for the attack was not clear, although some reports linked it to alleged terrorists seeking to create political discord, especially against the Government.

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. The U.S. Chargé d'Affaires and other embassy officials meet regularly with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship, principal religious leaders, and the Papal Nuncio.