

BOLIVIA 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.

U.S. embassy officials met with representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and leaders of religious groups to discuss church-state relations and the church's role in providing social services. The charge also promoted interfaith dialogue by hosting a roundtable discussion with leaders from several religious groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to a 2010 National Statistical Institute estimate, the population is 10.4 million. In the 2001 census, the latest to collect information on religion, 78 percent identify themselves as Roman Catholic and 16 percent as Protestant or evangelical. Approximately 3 percent belongs to smaller Christian groups. There are a very small number of Muslims and Jews. According to a 2010 survey, in the four largest cities the population is 81 percent Catholic and 10 percent Protestant or evangelical, suggesting that people in urban areas are more likely to identify as Catholic than are those living in rural communities.

Many indigenous communities, concentrated in rural areas, practice a mix of Catholic and spiritual traditions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. According to the constitution, the state respects and provides for "religious liberty and spiritual beliefs, in accordance with its worldview." The state is independent from all religious groups.

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The constitution provides both individual and collective religious and spiritual rights and allows public and private religious services. The constitution gives educational centers the right to teach religion and indigenous spiritual belief classes to encourage mutual respect between religious communities. It prohibits religious discrimination in access to educational institutions, and protects the right of access to public sport and recreational activities without regard to religion.

The penal code prohibits defamation against individuals or collective groups, although it does not specifically mention religious groups. The penalty for defamation is 20 to 240 days imprisonment.

Government policy encourages the Catholic Church to carry out its social welfare projects. Written agreements between the government and the Catholic Church, including a 2009 framework agreement, formalize the Catholic Church's extensive work in the areas of education, health, and social welfare.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including religious and missionary groups seeking legal recognition, must register with the governor's office of their respective state. Religious and missionary groups seeking legal recognition must also register with the MFA's Office of Religion and Nongovernmental Organizations. The current MFA registry includes more than 340 registered religious groups. Religious groups must submit an annual report to the Religion and Nongovernmental Organization Office to remain on the registry. Religious groups receiving foreign sources of funding may not register, but may enter into a framework agreement with the government for three years that affords the same judicial standing as NGOs, including tax-exempt status. Registered religious groups receive tax, customs, and other legal benefits. The government may not deny legal recognition to any organization based on its articles of faith; there is no fee for registration but the complex procedure typically requires legal assistance.

By law, religion classes are optional and school curriculum materials promote religious tolerance. All teachers, including those in private religious schools, must receive their training in government-run academies.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Corpus Christi, Winter Solstice/Aymara, New Year, All Souls Day, and Christmas.

Government Practices

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There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Due to the difficult registration process, some religious groups avoided official registration and operated informally.

Religious group leaders expressed concern during the year that the government favored certain religious groups by inviting them more frequently to participate in government ceremonies. Religious group leaders also opposed the government's decision to remove a question about religious affiliation from the November census, but the planning minister justified the government's decision as respectful of the state's secular constitution.

Catholic Church officials continued to express concern about the law that requires all teachers, including those in private religious schools, to receive their training in government run academies.

The government participated in interfaith meetings and ceremonies and worked directly with religious leaders. For example, President Evo Morales met with leaders of the Association of Reformed Churches and participated in their Easter Sunday ceremony, during which he praised the constitution for guaranteeing religious freedom and equal rights for members of all religious groups.

Religious leaders, including members of minority faiths, reported that their communities did not suffer state or societal discrimination.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

The vice minister of decolonization reported that in the first nine months of the year, there were seven cases filed under the anti-racism law for discrimination based on religious belief. None of the cases was resolved by year's end. According to religious group leaders, acts of discrimination because of religion were isolated and rare.

Religious groups continued to play a key role in providing social services. The country's religious registry reported the Catholic Church administered 74 percent of all religious charities, which included educational, health, and housing projects.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy staff met with government officials and religious group leaders to discuss church-state relations and church-administered social service programs. The embassy hosted an interfaith roundtable discussion with religious group leaders to discuss religious freedom and to foster mutual respect. During the discussion, religious group leaders pledged to continue to host interfaith exchanges and to work together to address their shared concern about the equitable inclusion of religious leaders at state events. The leaders shared support for the constitutional protection for religious freedom and for equal state treatment of religious groups.