Brazil

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.

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 3,286,488 square miles and a population of 191,900,000. Nearly all major religious groups are present. Many citizens worship in more than one church or participate in the rituals of more than one religion. The 2000 census by the Geographic and Statistical Institute of Brazil (IBGE) indicated that approximately 74 percent of the population identify themselves as Roman Catholic. Approximately 15 percent of the population is Protestant, an estimated 85 percent of whom are Pentecostal or evangelical. These groups include the Assemblies of God, Christian Congregation of Brazil, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, the Quadrangular Gospel, God is Love, Maranata, Brazil for Christ, House of the Blessing, New Life, and others. Lutherans, Presbyterians, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Congregationalists, and others account for most of the remaining Protestants and are centered in the south. In the 2000 census, 199,645 residents identify themselves as belonging to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons); however, the church lists its current membership as 970,903.

According to the 2000 census, there are 214,873 adherents of Buddhism and 151,080 adherents of other oriental religious groups. The Japanese-Brazilian community practices Shintoism to a limited degree. The census reports 17,088 adherents of indigenous traditions and 2,905 Hindus.

Followers of African and syncretic religious groups such as Candomblé total a reported 127,582, while followers of Umbanda total 397,431. There are no statistics on the number of followers of Xango or of Macumba; however, data from the same study indicates that followers of Afro-Brazilian religious groups total 0.3 percent of the population.

Followers of spiritism, mainly Kardecists—adherents of the doctrine expounded by Frenchman Allan Kardec in the 19th century—constitute approximately 1.3 percent, with an estimated 2,262,400 followers. There are 25,889 reported practitioners of Spiritualism. An estimated 7 percent do not practice any religion, and approximately 384,000 participants did not respond to the census.

Reliable figures on the number of Muslims do not exist. Muslim leaders estimate that there are between 700,000 and 3 million Muslims, with the lower figure representing those who actively practice their religion, while the higher estimate also includes nominal members. These figures are much higher than the 27,239 Muslims reported in the 2000 census. There are significant Muslim communities in São Paulo, the ABC
industrial suburbs of the greater São Paulo city area, and in the Santos area. There are also communities in Paraná State in the coastal region and in Curitiba and Foz do Iguaçu in the triborder area. The community is overwhelmingly Sunni; the Sunnis are almost completely assimilated into broader society. The recent Shiite immigrants gravitate to small insular communities in São Paulo, Curitiba, and Foz do Iguaçu. Sunni and Shi'a Islam are practiced predominantly by immigrants who arrived during the past 25 years from Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. Conversions to Islam have increased recently among non-Arab citizens. There are some 62 mosques, Islamic religious centers, and Islamic associations.

According to the Jewish Confederation of Brazil (CONIB), there are 119,560 Jews of whom approximately 60,000 reside in São Paulo State. There are 35,000 to 40,000 in Rio de Janeiro State, according to CONIB and Rio de Janeiro's Jewish Federation estimates. Many other cities have smaller Jewish communities.

Section II. Status of 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. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

There are no registration requirements for religious groups. There is no favored or state religion, although the Government has a concordat with the Vatican. All religious groups are free to establish places of worship, train clergy, and proselytize. There is a general provision for access to religious services and counsel in all civil and military establishments. The law prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The following holy days are observed as national or regional holidays: Saint Sebastian's Day, Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, Corpus Christi, Saint John's Day, Our Lady of Carmen (Carmo), Assumption Day, Our Lady Aparecida, All Souls' Day, Evangelicals Day, Immaculate Conception, and Christmas.

Public schools are required to offer religious instruction, but neither the Constitution nor legislation defines how this should be done. Religious instruction is optional for students. Each school defines how to offer religious instruction and in which religion, usually in agreement with parent councils. Education is mandatory for all children, but parents are free to send their children to the public or private school of their choice. The law prohibits public subsidies to schools that religious groups operate.

The Government restricted the access of nonindigenous persons, including missionaries, to indigenous reserves and required visitors to seek permission from the National Indigenous Foundation to enter indigenous areas; this permission also required an invitation from a member of the indigenous group to be visited.

It is illegal to write, edit, publish, or sell books that promote anti-Semitism or racism. The law enables courts to fine or imprison anyone who displays, distributes, or broadcasts anti-Semitic or racist material and mandates a 2 to 5-year prison term for violators.

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.
Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

Anti-Semitism was rare; however, there were reports of increasing violence against Jews. Leaders in the Jewish community expressed concern over the continued appearance of anti-Semitic material on Internet websites compiled by neo-Nazi and "skinhead" groups. There were reports of anti-Semitic graffiti, harassment, vandalism, and threats via telephone and e-mail. The Government officially equates anti-Semitism with racism, and there were some prosecutions for hate crimes underway in federal courts.

Numerous anti-Semitic websites continued to operate. Police contacts leading São Paulo's law enforcement efforts against hate crimes and anti-Semitic acts reported that the number of skinhead, neo-Nazi, and anti-Semitic websites or community network sites was increasing annually. Police identified a growing number of links to Internet servers based in the United States, Argentina, Italy, and Germany.

The Rio de Janeiro Jewish Federation (FIERJ) reported that it received an average of six telephoned threats per week; however, in February 2008 this number rose to nearly one hundred during the week before Rio's annual Carnival festivities when the "Unidos do Viradouro" samba school planned to showcase a parade float depicting scenes from the Holocaust, in what it termed a warning against future atrocities. Both FIERJ and the Simon Wiesenthal Center sought a court order against the float, and Viradouro was forced to withdraw the float from competition and fined $123,000 (200,000 Brazilian Reais). It was further barred from making any reference to Hitler or Nazism in its parade. In protest, Viradouro rebuilt the float and renamed it "Freedom of Expression."

During the reporting period federal police dropped the investigation due to a lack of leads into the 2006 incident of six men who damaged the Beth Jacob Synagogue in Campinas.

Evangelicals allegedly intimidated practitioners of African-based religions in Rio de Janeiro. In March 2008 the local press reported that neo-Pentecostal drug traffickers from the Morro do Dende, Morro do Alemao, and Grota favelas threatened practitioners of Candomblé and Umbanda. (Neo-Pentecostals are evangelicals who combine Pentecostalism and traditional Christianity.) There were additional reports of the destruction of Candomblé and Umbanda temples and the forced migration of priests and members to the Baixada Fluminense community. As a result, in April 2008 religious and political figures launched a letter-writing campaign to the Chamber of Deputies and to the Rio de Janeiro State Secretariat for Public Security demanding increased protection in these communities to ensure the right to exercise one's faith.

In February 2008 protesters targeted the municipal government of Salvador, Bahia State when it began demolition of a Candomblé temple. Religious groups charged the city with being intolerant, and the Counselor of the National Secretariat of Human Rights began a hunger strike in protest. Ultimately, the Mayor of Salvador, Joao Henrique Barradas Carneiro, publicly apologized and guaranteed that the city would rebuild the temple. The city dismissed the official responsible for scheduling the demolition.

In February 2008 a Brazilian federal bank in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais State, rejected the application of a Candomblé Association to open a deposit; the bank alleged that it was not interested in having "that kind of Association" as a client. There were no legal consequences stemming from this incident because the bank eventually accepted the group as a client.

The Center for Promoting Islam in Latin America in São Bernardo do Campo, São Paulo State, which has a large Shiite population, reported frequent complaints of verbal harassment against Muslim women wearing veils in public; however, both the Federation of Muslim Associations in Brazil (Sunny) and the Center of Islam in Brazil (Shiite) alleged that there were no official reports of discrimination or police abuse against Muslims.

There was no national interfaith movement; however, the National Commission for Religious Dialogue brought together Christian and Jewish communities during the year. In 2007 the Protestant-Catholic Group of Dialogue (including Evangelicals and Pentecostals) was created. The Group of Ecumenical Reflection and Interreligious Dialogue supported these groups and promoted dialogue at regional and national levels.
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.

Released on September 19, 2008

International Religious Freedom Report Home Page