



## Uruguay

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2009**

**October 26, 2009**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of 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.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and 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 68,039 square miles and a population of 3.2 million (according to the 2004 census). The most recent (2007) statistics on religious preference from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) indicate that 45.1 percent identify themselves as Roman Catholics, 10.5 percent as non-Catholic Christians, 0.7 percent as Afro-Umbandistas, 0.4 percent as Jewish, and 27.8 percent believe in God but do not claim a religious affiliation. Some religious groups dispute the accuracy of the NBS statistics, and other groups are not reflected in the survey.

Mainstream Protestants include primarily Anglicans, Methodists, Lutherans, and Baptists. Other groups include evangelicals, Pentecostals, Mennonites, Eastern Orthodox, Christian Scientists, Salvation Army, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Evangelicals estimate that they have 200,000 followers (6 percent of the population), Afro-Umbandistas at least 100,000 (3 percent), The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) 100,000 members (3 percent), and the Jewish community approximately 25,000 (0.7 percent). The estimated 4,000 Baha'is are concentrated primarily in Montevideo. Approximately 850 families practice Buddhism. The Unification Church is active and has major property holdings, including a daily newspaper. An Islamic cultural representative estimated that there are 300 to 400 Muslims. In 2008 the Egyptian Islamic Center in Montevideo, which is supported by the Egyptian Embassy, was inaugurated as the first mosque in the country. Muslims also gather to pray at the Uruguay Islamic Center in Canelones.

#### 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. The Constitution and law prohibit discrimination based on religion. The Penal Code prohibits mistreatment of ethnic, religious, and other minority groups. The Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Discrimination, created in 2007, ensures government compliance with the laws, and

representatives from several religious groups are active participants. Some religious leaders stated that the Government, in its efforts to protect freedom of speech and expression, fails to control slanderous speech.

There is strict separation of church and state. In April 2009 MERCOSUR held a two-day roundtable discussion with more than 80 local religious leaders to discuss challenges of religious expression in a secular state. The declarations from the meeting recommended greater inclusion of religious groups by the Government in education, government, and culture.

Religious groups are entitled to tax exemptions on their houses of worship, and no group reported difficulties. To receive tax exemptions, a religious group must register as a nonprofit entity and draft organizing statutes. It then applies to the Ministry of Education and Culture, which examines the legal entity and may grant religious status. The group must reapply every five years. Once the Ministry grants religious status, the group can request an exemption each year from the taxing authority, which is usually the municipal government.

The Government observes Three Kings' Day, Carnival (the Monday and Tuesday prior to Ash Wednesday), Holy Thursday, Good Friday, All Souls' Day, and Christmas as national holidays.

Muslims may obtain an optional identity card that identifies their religious affiliation to employers and allows them to leave work early on Fridays, and employers generally respected this practice.

Religious instruction in public schools is prohibited. Public schools allow students who belong to minority religious groups to miss school for religious holidays without penalty. There are private religious schools, primarily Catholic and Jewish.

#### 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.

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, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The Christian-Jewish Council met regularly to promote interfaith understanding. In addition, the mainstream Protestant denominations met regularly among themselves and with the Catholic Church. There were several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that promoted interfaith understanding.

#### 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. Embassy staff met with human rights and religious NGOs, including B'nai Brith and the Central

Jewish Committee of Uruguay. They also met with leaders of religious communities, including representatives of the Catholic Church, the Jewish community, the Muslim community, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Protestant groups, and Afro-Umbandistas.