Argentina

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government also increasingly promoted interfaith dialogue and engaged local religious groups via advisory committees and grassroots initiatives. Diverse religious groups enjoy tolerance and coexistence, but not necessarily equality, since some vestiges of preferential church-state ties endure for the Roman Catholic Church.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

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

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 1,068,302 square miles and a population of 37 million, according to the 2001 census. Accurate estimates of religious affiliation are difficult to obtain; however, information supplied by the National Registry of Worship, various religious groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) produced the following estimates in 2005, which do not necessarily reflect active religious practice: Catholics, 70 percent of the population; Protestants, 9 percent; Muslims, 1.5 percent; Jews, 0.8 percent; other religious groups, 2.5 percent; and the remainder, no declared religious affiliation. Estimates often are based on outdated census data and questionable presumptions, such as assuming that immigrants of Middle Eastern origin were Muslim. The Islamic Center estimates that only one of three Middle Eastern immigrants is Muslim. A significant portion of the population of Middle Eastern heritage is of Syrian or Lebanese extraction and approximately half of these immigrants are Orthodox Catholic or Maronite. Of the 500,000 to 600,000 in the Muslim community, the Islamic Center estimated that 90 percent are Sunni and 10 percent Shiite; the Islamic Center and members of the King Fahd Mosque estimated that 70 percent of the growing population of converts converted to Sufi Islam.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution grants all residents the right "to profess their faith freely" and states that foreigners enjoy all the civil rights of citizens.

The Constitution states that the Government "sustains the apostolic Roman Catholic faith" and provides the Catholic Church with a variety of subsidies not available to other religious groups. These subsidies, estimated at $4 million per annum, have been described as compensation for expropriation of properties that belonged to Catholic institutions in the colonial era. For instance, the Government pays monthly salaries or allowances to Catholic diocesan and auxiliary bishops, Catholic seminarians, Catholic border parishes, a group of secular priests, and retired Catholic bishops. These payments are exempt from federal deductions for the equivalent of income taxes, social security, and medicare. The Government doubled the bishops' salaries in 2006 from approximately US $1,300 (ARS 4,000) to approximately US $2,600 (ARS 8,000) monthly. The Catholic Church also enjoys institutional privileges such as school subsidies, a large degree of autonomy for parochial schools, licensing preferences for radio frequencies, prison chaplains, and prisoner access.
The press characterized the relationship between the Government and the Catholic Church as tense, noting President Kirchner’s refusal to meet with any religious leaders and veiled criticisms of leaders of the Catholic Church for their support of labor strikes in Santa Cruz province, their criticism of the Government’s sex education policies, and their critique of the country’s socio-political situation. In October 2006 retired Catholic Monsignor Joaquín Piña led a civic coalition against a single-issue referendum proposed by the Governor of Misiones Province, Carlos Rovira, which would have changed the provincial constitution to allow indefinite reelection of governors. Piña’s coalition defeated the referendum, potentially contributing to the tense church-state relationship. In April 2007 the Catholic bishops met and released a statement condemning proposals to legalize abortion and same-sex civil unions. In May 2007 the press reported that President Kirchner met with Piña as a political gesture toward the Catholic Church.

The Secretariat of Worship in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, International Trade, and Worship (MFA) is responsible for conducting the Government's relations with religious organizations. In addition both the Federal Government and the Government of the Province of Buenos Aires promote multilateral dialogue with diverse sectors of the community, including religious representatives. For instance, the Government consulted with religious representatives, among others, to determine how best to address increased poverty as a result of the 2001-2002 financial crisis.

Tax exemption and registration requirements are key issues for religious groups. Religious organizations that wish to obtain tax-exempt status must register with the Secretariat of Worship and report periodically to maintain their status. The Secretariat for Worship considers the following criteria when determining whether to grant or withdraw registration: a place to worship, an organizational charter, and an ordained clergy. Registration is not required for private religious services, such as those conducted in homes, but is necessary for public activities. Well-established religious groups value this system, while fledgling and less conventional religious movements find the system discriminatory.

In September/October 2006, a council of advisors representing an array of non-Catholic religious groups submitted to the executive branch of the Federal Government a draft law to promote greater religious freedom. By the end of the reporting period Congress had not received the draft law.

Registered religious organizations may bring in foreign missionaries by applying to the Secretariat of Worship, which in turn notifies immigration authorities so that appropriate documents may be issued. There were no reports that foreign missionaries were denied visas, but German evangelical and South African Jama’at al-Tabligh members reportedly experienced difficulties obtaining visas.

The Government continued relaxing restrictions on indigenous groups and improving recognition. For instance, the Government increasingly accepted indigenous names for the civil name registry and increasingly included information in school books regarding indigenous groups and their belief systems. The Constitution provided for this increased recognition in 1994. In the past few years, the Government sponsored initiatives, such as the Ministry of Education’s National Program of Intercultural Bilingual Education, to help in reaching this goal.

The National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Racism (INADI), a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice, is charged with promoting social and cultural pluralism and combating discriminatory attitudes. INADI, whose board includes representatives of the major religious groups, investigates violations of a 1988 law that prohibits discrimination based on "race, religion, nationality, ideology, political opinion, sex, economic position, social class, or physical characteristics." The agency also conducts educational programs, supports victims of discrimination, and promotes proactive measures to prevent discrimination.

Three Christian holy days are observed as national holidays: Good Friday, Immaculate Conception, and Christmas. In April 2006 legislation passed which extended authorized paid leave (from 3 days to 7) for those observing the Jewish holy days of New Year, the Days of Atonement, and Passover, and also for those observing the holy days of the Islamic New Year.

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 and synagogues operate private schools, including seminaries and universities.

The Secretariat of Worship sought to promote religious harmony by sending official representatives to events such as religious freedom conferences, rabbinical ordinations, Rosh Hashana and Eid al-Fitr celebrations, and religious activities held by Protestant and Orthodox churches.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.
In February 2005 the Government called for the removal of the military's Chaplain General, Bishop Antonio Baseotto, due to controversial comments the Bishop had made regarding the Government's reproductive health policies. (The position of Chaplain General is appointed by the Vatican, although it is subsidized by the Government.) Since the Vatican refused to remove the Bishop, he remained nominally in his position until he retired in 2006.

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.

 Anti-Semitism

The Delegation of Argentine Israelite Associations (DAIA) maintains a database tracking anti-Semitic incidents. In 2006 DAIA registered 586 complaints, among them 25 threats (including bomb threats and threats of other physical violence), and 392 incidents of anti-Semitic propaganda (including graffiti and literature distribution). DAIA indicated that these statistics represented a 35 percent increase in anti-Semitic acts in 2006 compared with 2005. The MFA reported that they had not received any official complaints from religious groups in 2006.

On March 15, 2007, Interpol's Executive Committee recommended by consensus the issuance of international capture notices for six suspects wanted for the 1994 terrorist bombing of the Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA). The Government of Iran appealed the decision and Interpol's General Assembly is expected to vote on the matter in November 2007.

On November 21, 2006, during a soccer match, Defensores de Belgrano fans chanted anti-Semitic songs against Atlanta's fans and players. Because of a similar incident in 2000, the referees were instructed to end the match. The lead referee did not comply; lawsuits were filed against him, the police responsible for the security of the event, and the president of Defensores de Belgrano, who later apologized and condemned the incident. INADI and the Argentine Football Association together sought to strengthen measures against discriminatory expressions in the stadiums.

During the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel in 2006, elements of the Buenos Aires Shiite population as well as leftist extremists demonstrated near the Israeli Embassy. Although a political issue, the demonstrations took on religious overtones when small groups utilized anti-Semitic slogans, signs, and graffiti. Other groups, including the Lebanese community and pro-Israeli youth, held counterdemonstrations and peace demonstrations.

 Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

Argentina is a member of the International Task Force for Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. In January 2007 the Government cosponsored a U.S.-drafted U.N. resolution that condemns without any reservation any denial of the Holocaust and urges all member states unreservedly to reject any denial of the Holocaust as a historical event, either in full or in part, or any activities to that end. On April 19, 2007, President Kirchner addressed the Jewish community during a commemoration ceremony of the 64th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, where he paid homage to the lives lost during the Holocaust. Alluding to the 1994 AMIA bombing, the President also reiterated his administration's commitment to pursuing justice.

In addition to a draft Federal law, 2006 witnessed increased government-sponsored interfaith dialogue and increased inclusion of minority religious groups and indigenous groups in this dialogue.

 Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

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

NGOs actively promoted interreligious understanding. Ecumenical attendance was common at important religious events. NGOs promoting religious fraternity included the Argentine Jewish-Christian Brotherhood (an affiliate of the International Council of Christians and Jews), the Argentine Council for Religious Freedom, the Foundation for Education for Peace, and the Federation of Arab Entities (Latin America), known as FEARAB. Long-standing cooperation among FEARAB (Latin America), the Islamic Center of the Republic of Argentina, DAIA and the AMIA ceased due to the August 2006 conflict between Hezbollah and Israel and related political developments.
Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. embassy officers met periodically with various religious leaders and attended events organized by faith-based organizations and NGOs that addressed issues of religious freedom.

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