



Bolivia

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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.

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 424,164 square miles and a population of 9 million. According to a 2001 survey conducted by the National Statistical Institute, 78 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, 16 percent is 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 other Christian religions. 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. Atheists are estimated to constitute an insignificant percentage of the population.

Approximately 55 percent of the population identifies itself as indigenous, with 29 percent Quechua, 24 percent Aymara, 1 percent Chiquitano, and 1 percent Guaraní. Several other indigenous groups are also present, although none represents more than .5 percent of the population. Approximately 30 percent of the population identifies itself as mestizo (of mixed indigenous and European ancestry) and 15 percent as white.

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 coexisted with attachment to traditional beliefs and rituals, with a focus on the Pachamama or Mother Earth figure, as well as on Ekeko, a traditional indigenous god of luck, harvests, and general abundance, whose festival is celebrated widely on January 24. Some indigenous leaders have sought to discard all forms of Christianity; however, this effort has not led to a significant increase in the number of "indigenous-belief only" worshippers.

Sources from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) estimate membership in the Mormon Church at approximately 104,000. 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 Jewish community is spread throughout the country and has synagogues in La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz. Muslims have cultural centers that also serve as mosques in La Paz, Santa Cruz, and Cochabamba that welcome both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims. Korean immigrants have their own church in La Paz. Many Korean immigrants and the majority of Chinese and Japanese immigrants settled in La Paz, Cochabamba, and Santa Cruz, where there is a university founded by Korean immigrants that has evangelical and Presbyterian ties. There are Buddhist and Shinto communities, as well as a substantial Baha'i community, throughout the country.

Missionaries are present.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government 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 establishes the state's recognition and support of the Roman Catholic Church; however, in August 2006 a Constituent Assembly convened that was not expected to include such language in a proposed constitution. In August 2007 the Assembly was scheduled to conclude.

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 Catholic 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 whether or not a new constitution formally recognized the Church. The Catholic Church exercised a limited degree of political influence through the Catholic Bishops' Conference. By custom the Government sometimes called upon the Catholic Church to arbitrate political disagreements, but this was not formalized in law.

Four Christian holy days are observed as national holidays: Good Friday, Corpus Christi, All Souls' Day, and Christmas.

Nongovernmental 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 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. 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 that lasts 3 years and 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 curricular materials describe it as such. Students face some peer pressure to participate, although this pressure has declined in recent years. Non-Catholic 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 education programs. Beginning in 2006 the Government began to stress a revival of indigenous religious beliefs and rituals. Indigenous religious rituals endorsed by the Government occasionally preceded government events. Government officials attended both Catholic Masses and indigenous religious rituals in the course of their official functions.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

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

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. The U.S. Ambassador and other embassy officials continued to meet regularly with officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship, principal religious leaders, and the Papal Nuncio.

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