



Bolivia

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. Roman Catholicism is the official religion.

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

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

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 its population is estimated at 8.3 million. According to a 2001 survey conducted by the National Statistical Institute, 78 percent of the population is Roman Catholic, and Protestant denominations account for 16 to 19 percent of the population. Catholic membership is higher in urban than in rural areas, while Protestant affiliation is highest (approximately 20 percent) in the countryside. Approximately 2.5 percent indicated no religious affiliation, and less than 0.2 percent claimed affiliation with other faiths, including Islam, the Baha'i Faith, Judaism, Buddhism, and Shinto. There are 280 non Catholic faith-based organizations and more than 200 Catholic groups registered by the Government. Mennonites, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Lutherans, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, Pentecostals, Methodists, and several evangelical groups maintain an active foreign missionary presence. Atheists are estimated to constitute an insignificant percentage of the population.

Between 50 and 60 percent of the population identifies itself as indigenous, belonging to Aymara (estimated at 1.5 million), Quechua (2.4 million), Guarani (77,000), Chiquitano (63,000), or 1 of 20 smaller groups. The indigenous population is higher in rural areas, where the formal Roman 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 Roman Catholicism for centuries has coexisted with attachment to traditional beliefs and rituals, with a focus on the Pachamama or Mother Earth figure, as well as on Akeko, 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.

Mormons are present throughout the country; Mormon sources estimate the number of their adherents in the country at more than 140,000. The Jewish community is spread throughout the country and has established a synagogue in La Paz. Muslims have cultural centers that also serve as mosques in La Paz, Santa Cruz, and Cochabamba. These cultural centers welcome both Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims. Korean immigrants have their own church in La Paz. The majority of Korean, Chinese, and Japanese immigrants have settled in 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.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. Roman Catholicism predominates, and the Constitution recognizes it as the official religion. The Roman Catholic Church receives

support from the State (approximately 300 priests receive small government stipends), in part to compensate the Church for properties expropriated in the past. The Church exercises a limited degree of political influence through the Bolivian Bishops' Conference.

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

Non-Catholic religious organizations, including missionary groups, must register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship and receive authorization ("personeria juridica") for legal religious representation. There were no reports that the Government restricted gatherings of nonregistered religious groups; however, 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; however, the procedure typically requires significant legal assistance and can be both costly and time-consuming, which has led some groups to forgo registration and operate informally. Religious groups receiving funds from abroad may enter into a framework agreement ("marco convenio") with the Government that lasts 3 years and permits them to enjoy judicial standing similar to that of other nongovernmental organizations and have tax-free status. Fourteen religious groups, including the Catholic Church, have done so. Members of less prominent religious communities have objected to the Government's lack of understanding regarding the activities and worship of these faiths, which allegedly has resulted in additional delays when attempting to finalize legal registration.

Only Catholic religious instruction is provided in public schools. By law, it is optional and is described as such in curricular materials; however, students face strong peer pressure to participate. Non-Catholic instruction is not available in public schools for students of other faiths. The Government continues to develop an alternate course on "ethics," but it has been challenged recently by political parties in the Congress who view this as a means by which conservative faith-based groups would obtain significant influence over public education.

The Government does not take an active role in promoting interfaith understanding, although it is represented at interfaith meetings. It works with Catholic and Protestant organizations on social and health programs. If the President attends Mass as part of his official functions, it is traditional for all Cabinet members, regardless of their faiths, to accompany him.

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.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor United States 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.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom, and ecumenical dialogue between various religious groups continued. In 2004, leaders from Muslim, Jewish, Baha'i, Methodist, Catholic, and indigenous communities, the latter representing traditional beliefs, organized several interfaith meetings. These gatherings involved prayer, interfaith worship, and public displays of interfaith cooperation.

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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