

AUSTRALIA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. Embassy in Canberra and the U.S. Consulates General in Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney regularly engaged with a wide range of religious leaders, faith communities and groups, and government officials to promote religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 22.3 million (July 2013 estimate). According to Australia's 2011 census, 61 percent of citizens consider themselves Christian, including 25 percent Roman Catholic and 17 percent Anglican, while 22.3 percent report having no religious affiliation. Buddhists constitute 2.5 percent of the population, Muslims 2.2 percent, Hindus 1.3 percent, and Jews 0.5 percent.

The census indicated that indigenous persons constitute 2.5 percent of the population and that 1 percent of indigenous respondents practice traditional indigenous religions. Affiliation with a traditional indigenous religion is higher in very remote areas (6 percent) than in all other areas (less than 1 percent). Approximately 60 percent of indigenous respondents identify themselves as Christian and an estimated 20 percent report having no religious affiliation.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The constitution bars the federal government from making any law that imposes a state religion or religious observance, prohibits the free exercise of religion, or establishes a religious test for a federal public office. Although the government is secular, each session of parliament begins with a recitation of the Lord's Prayer.

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Individuals who suffer religious discrimination have recourse under federal discrimination laws or through the court system and bodies such as the Australian Human Rights Commission. In June the government removed religious exemptions that allowed federally-funded aged-care providers to preference a married couple over an unmarried couple or a heterosexual over a homosexual resident.

The country accepts refugees fleeing religious persecution and is party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol governing refugees.

Commonwealth and state public service agencies are active in promoting religious tolerance in the workplace. Public service employees who believe they are denied a promotion on religious grounds can appeal to the public service merit protection commissioner.

The state of Tasmania is the only state or territory whose constitution specifically provides citizens with the right to profess and practice their religion; however, seven of the eight states and territories have laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of a person's religion or ethno-religious background. South Australia is the only jurisdiction that does not explicitly prohibit discrimination on the grounds of religion. All jurisdictions, apart from South Australia, have independent agencies to mediate allegations of religious discrimination.

Religious groups are not required to register; however, to receive tax-exempt status, nonprofit religious groups must apply to the Australia Tax Office (ATO). Registration with the ATO has no effect on how religious groups are treated, apart from standard ATO checks.

The government permits religious education in public schools, generally taught by volunteers using approved curricula, with the option for parents to have their children not attend. There is no national standard for approving religious curricula, which happens at state and local levels. The government's National School Chaplaincy Program provides annual support of up to 20,000 Australian dollars (A\$) (\$17,860) in urban areas and A\$24,000 (\$21,430) in remote areas for government and nongovernment school communities to establish or extend school chaplaincy services. The government continued to dispense monies from a A\$222 million (\$198.2 million) fund it established for disbursement between 2012 and 2014

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to support participating schools and extend funding to 1,000 additional schools in remote and disadvantaged areas. Public schools in New South Wales provide secular ethics classes as an alternative for students who do not attend optional scripture classes. In September Tasmania amended its anti-discrimination laws to allow religious schools to give preference in admitting students of the school's religion, but only when the demand for entry into the school exceeds the number of places available. The federal government provides funding to private schools, the majority of which are faith based.

Government Practices

In 2012 the Land and Environment Court declared the Liverpool Council's consent to build an Islamic school in Hoxton Park invalid on the basis that the local council failed to consider the environmental impact of the development. The court permitted the school to operate through March 2013. The school submitted a modified application for development with the local council, which, under new procedures, was approved by the Joint Regional Planning Panel in February.

The government ran extensive programs that promoted respect for diversity and cultural pluralism. The country was a cosponsor of the Regional Interfaith Dialogue with Indonesia, New Zealand, and the Philippines to help broaden respect for religious diversity in the region, including in Australia. The government's Multicultural Advisory Council provided advice on "social cohesion issues relating to Australia's cultural and religious diversity." The government provided a range of programs to promote religious tolerance that focused on youth outreach and early intervention, education, and "deradicalization" in prison of individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses.

The government's national multicultural policy, *The People of Australia*, was based on a government-wide approach to maintaining a socially cohesive and harmonious society, and includes religious tolerance as a component.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

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Several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) promoted tolerance and better understanding among religious groups. These groups included the Columban Center for Christian-Muslim Relations, the National Council of Churches in Australia and its affiliated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission, the Australian Council of Christians and Jews, and the Affinity Intercultural Foundation.

In the 12-month period ending in September 2013, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry, an NGO, recorded 657 anti-Semitic incidents, compared with 543 during the previous 12 months. These incidents included physical and verbal assaults, such as throwing eggs at Jewish people walking to and from synagogues, vandalism, and harassment. In October five Jewish adults were assaulted in Sydney during a suspected anti-Semitic confrontation that reportedly resulted in the hospitalization of some of the victims. Police arrested several individuals, including two minors who were charged in juvenile court with breach of bail and affray, a man charged with affray, and a man charged with possessing a knife in a public place and assault occasioning actual bodily harm. Legal proceedings and a police investigation were ongoing at year's end. Political, religious, and community leaders widely condemned the alleged attack, which has been characterized by Australian-Jewish leaders as a reminder of the need to demonstrate commitment to multiculturalism and tolerance in Australia.

In April then-Prime Minister Julia Gillard became the first of dozens of Australian politicians to sign the London Declaration on Combating Anti-Semitism. The media dealt with expressions of anti-Semitic sentiment by private citizens in its social media outlets and other public commentary. For example, in October the Australian Broadcasting Corporation apologized for allowing anti-Semitic comments to remain on the Facebook page of one of its television channels.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Embassy in Canberra and the U.S. Consulates General in Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney regularly engaged a wide range of religious leaders, faith communities and groups, and government officials on topics including the promotion of religious freedom and tolerance.

Officers from the embassy participated in Canberra's largest and highest-profile iftar, hosted by the Bluestar Intercultural Center and attended by the minister for

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multicultural affairs. The officers spoke with government officials and community leaders at the event regarding U.S. efforts to promote religious tolerance

The Consulate General in Sydney maintained close relations with the city's large Jewish community and deepened its relationship with other religious communities, including Muslim and Catholic groups. Consulate general representatives participated in events that provided an opportunity to underscore the importance of religious freedom and build relationships to promote diversity and tolerance. Consulate general officials addressed diversity and tolerance in the United States with a class of approximately 140 11th grade students at Birrong Girls High School, a culturally diverse school in Western Sydney. The Consul General met with committee members of the Islamic Society of Gold Coast, Inc., and emphasized the importance of Islamic communities in the United States and the need for open dialogue to build and maintain trust among diverse communities and countries. The Consul General also attended a friendship dialogue iftar, and another officer represented the consulate general at an interfaith dialogue conference attended by New South Wales cultural and political leaders. The consulate general's public affairs representatives established a relationship with *The Point Magazine*, a community-based, youth-focused, digital publication that promotes tolerance among religious communities and embracing one's own faith while allowing others to do the same without obstruction.

The Consulate General in Perth hosted a roundtable discussion including the Ambassador and Muslim community leaders from Western Australia, covering subjects such as measures to improve community awareness of Islam and religious tolerance overall. In order to promote interfaith understanding, the consulate general hosted quarterly events that brought together Western Australia's youth from a variety of cultural backgrounds and religious affiliations for informal discussions of contemporary problems.

The Consulate General in Melbourne increased programs to disadvantaged audiences by providing grants to interethnic and interfaith organizations in the areas of youth leadership, with a special focus on the Northern Territory. The consulate general included influential individuals and NGOs within the Muslim community in a variety of programs, including an ongoing series of events focused on women's leadership. The consulate general actively engaged Muslim communities, especially during Ramadan, to share in their cultural traditions and discuss the U.S. commitment to supporting religious tolerance. The consulate

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general hosted an iftar dinner, which brought together youth leaders from media, sports, business, NGOs, and faith communities in an interfaith setting. In addition, the Consul General and other officers attended several iftar events hosted by the Parliament of Victoria, universities, and civic organizations, and a Passover seder hosted by the Capitol Jewish Forum. Consulate general staff also attended iftar events hosted at private family homes through an initiative organized by the Australian Intercultural Society, a largely Turkish-Muslim organization that promotes interfaith dialogue.

Through exchange programs, the embassy and consulates general sent several influential Muslim leaders to the United States and continued to connect with them as they built profiles upon their return, including in national media, politics, and NGOs.