

# **URUGUAY 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and affirms “the State supports no religion.” Legal statutes prohibit discrimination based on religion.

The Christian-Jewish Council met regularly to promote interfaith understanding. Activities included outreach to other religious groups and sponsorship of and participation in conferences and meetings related to religious freedom and understanding. In September the Board for Interreligious Dialogue held its sixth annual forum to celebrate the International Day of Peace. Participants in the event promoted interfaith understanding and respect for different religious values.

U.S. embassy officials met with the government and religious leaders to promote religious freedom and tolerance.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.3 million (July 2015 estimate). The National Institute of Statistics data on religious preference from 2008, the most recent year available, indicate approximately 45 percent of the population self-identifies as Roman Catholic, and approximately 10 percent as non-Catholic Christian. Groups that together constitute less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah’s Witnesses, Bahais, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Afro-Umbandists (who blend elements of Catholicism with animism and African and indigenous beliefs), Jews, Buddhists, members of the Unification Church, and Muslims (300-400 adherents ). Approximately 28 percent of the population indicates a belief in God but no specific religious affiliation and 15 percent are atheist or agnostic.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and states “the State supports no religion whatever.” The penal code prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The Catholic Church is accorded the right to ownership of all churches that have been built wholly or partly from funds of the National Treasury, with the sole

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exception of chapels dedicated for use by asylums, hospitals, prisons, or other public establishments.

There is no compulsory military service.

Religious groups are entitled to property tax exemptions only for their houses of worship. To receive such exemptions, a religious group must register with the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) as a nonprofit and present a dossier, including the organization's structure and objectives. The ministry examines the dossier and determines if the religious group is eligible to receive a tax exemption. If approved, the group may request a property tax exemption from the taxing authority, usually the municipal government.

Religious instruction in public schools is prohibited by the constitution. Public schools are closed on major Christian holidays. Students belonging to non-Christian or minority religious groups may be absent from school on their religious holidays without penalty.

There are no quotas or visa requirements affecting missionaries.

### **Government Practices**

The National Institute of Human Rights, an autonomous branch of congress, and the MEC's Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Forms of Discrimination enforced government compliance with antidiscrimination laws. Both organizations received complaints of discrimination, conducted investigations, and issued rulings on whether discrimination occurred. The ruling recommended if the case should receive a judicial or administrative hearing. Only the courts or the Ministry of Labor, however, could sanction or fine for discrimination. The institute and commission provided free legal services to the complainant. The National Institute of Human Rights reported that 6 percent of the complaints it received in 2014 were based on religion, as compared with 8 percent in 2013. The Honorary Commission reported it received nine total complaints of religious discrimination since its inauguration in 2007. Representatives from religious and civil society groups were active participants in the commission.

The Central Jewish Committee reported the official education curriculum continued to lack coverage of the Holocaust. In January the foreign minister

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presented a special message commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day which was broadcast on national media networks. The congress honored those whose lives had been lost during a special session. The government had observer status at the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

In January the MEC's Honorary Commission against Racism, the Municipality of Montevideo, and the Central Jewish Committee sponsored a travelling exhibition commemorating the life of Anne Frank.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

The Christian-Jewish Council, whose Christian participants include Catholics, evangelicals, and Anglicans, met regularly to promote interfaith understanding. Activities included outreach to other religious groups, such as the Afro-Umbandist and Muslim communities, as well as sponsorship of and participation in conferences and meetings related to religious freedom and understanding. In September the Board for Interreligious Dialogue – comprising government officials, NGOs, and religious leaders representing a wide array of faiths – held its sixth annual forum to celebrate the International Day of Peace. Participants in the event promoted interfaith understanding and respect for different religious values.

Government officials and religious and civil society leaders said society exhibited a high degree of religious tolerance.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials maintained regular contact with a range of government institutions including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the MEC, and the National Institute of Human Rights.

U.S. embassy officials maintained open discussions with human rights organizations and leaders of religious groups to elicit their perspective on religious tolerance in the country.