

BRAZIL 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The federal constitution states freedom of conscience and belief is inviolable, and free exercise of religious beliefs is guaranteed. The constitution prohibits federal, state, and local governments from either supporting or hindering any specific religion. In response to instances of religious intolerance, particularly directed at followers of African-originated religious groups, the federal government launched national public awareness campaigns on social media to highlight respect for religious plurality and announced the creation of a national Network for Protection of Victims of Religious Intolerance. A number of state and municipal-level legislatures throughout the country held public hearings on combating religious intolerance. New initiatives to combat religious intolerance included enhanced training for law enforcement officials involved in combating crime based on religion.

According to the federal government Secretariat of Human Rights (SDH), its hotline received 19 percent more calls about religious intolerance than the previous year. According to a report from the non-governmental organization (NGO) Commission to Combat Religious Intolerance (CCIR), 70 percent of religious intolerance cases between 2012 and 2015 in the state of Rio de Janeiro were directed at practitioners of African-originated religions. In August a group of men broke into a temple for the practice of an African-originated religion in Nova Iguacu (on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro), destroying religious images and statues, and burning the temple to the ground. In April an Ubanda practitioner stabbed his evangelical Christian neighbor for lighting candles that he said would bring “negative vibrations.” The victim was admitted to the hospital with non-life-threatening injuries; the assailant was detained by police.

Embassy officials met with members of the National Committee for the Respect of Religious Diversity (CNRDR), which includes members from various federal ministries, civil society organizations, and faith-based organizations to discuss tolerance and religious diversity. U.S. officials also met with the president of the Palmares Foundation of the Ministry of Culture to learn about its initiative to promote respect for the practice of African-originated religions in the country. The Ambassador discussed interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance in meetings with the president and secretary general of the Catholic National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) and the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, among others.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 205.8 million (July 2016 estimate). According to the 2010 census, 64.6 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 22 percent is Protestant. Approximately 60 percent of Protestants belong to Pentecostal churches, 18 percent to “mainstream” Protestant churches, and 22 percent to other Protestant groups. Other Christian groups, each constituting less than 1 percent of the population, include Jehovah’s Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Atheists, agnostics, those who claim no religion, and those whose religion is unknown make up roughly 8 percent of the population.

Other groups, each constituting less than 1 percent of the population, include Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and African and syncretic religious groups such as Candomble and Umbanda. There are a small number of adherents of indigenous religious beliefs.

According to the 2010 census, there are approximately 35,200 Muslims, while the Federation of Muslim Associations of Brazil states the number at approximately 1.5 million. Other observers estimate the number of Muslims to be between 400,000 and 500,000. There are significant numbers of Muslims in Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba, and Foz do Iguazu, as well as in smaller cities in the states of Parana and Rio Grande do Sul.

According to the Jewish Confederation of Brazil, there are approximately 125,000 Jews, 65,000 of whom reside in Sao Paulo State and 25,000 in Rio de Janeiro State. Many other cities have smaller Jewish communities.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The federal constitution states that freedom of conscience and belief is inviolable, and the free exercise of religious beliefs is guaranteed. The constitution prohibits federal, state, and local governments from either supporting or hindering any specific religion. The law provides penalties of up to five years in prison for crimes of religious intolerance. Courts may fine or imprison for two to five years any individual who displays, distributes, or broadcasts religiously intolerant

material. It is illegal to write, edit, publish, or sell literature that promotes religious intolerance.

Religious groups are not required to register to establish places of worship, train clergy, or proselytize, but groups seeking tax-exempt status must register with the Department of Federal Revenue and the local municipality. States and municipalities have different requirements and regulations for obtaining tax-exempt status. Most jurisdictions require groups to document the purpose of their congregation, provide an accounting of finances, and have a fire inspection of any house of worship. Local zoning laws and noise ordinances may limit where a religious group can build houses of worship or hold ceremonies. A constitutional provision provides the right of access to religious services and counsel in all civil and military establishments.

Public schools are required to offer religious instruction, but neither the constitution nor legislation defines the parameters. By law the instruction should be nondenominational and without proselytizing, with alternative instruction for students who do not want to participate. The law prohibits public subsidies to schools operated by religious organizations.

The law requires religious access, including for members of African-originated religions, in public institutions such as hospitals, prisons, and other institutions. African-originated religions are understood, but not officially recognized, to be “religions whose theological and philosophical essences have their roots in traditional African religions.”

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The SDH released the preliminary results of its Report on Religious Intolerance and Violence in Brazil covering the period 2011-2015. The report included press coverage of religious violence and intolerance reported to national ombudsmen, and analysis of current jurisprudence. Of the 409 articles published on religious violence and intolerance from 2011 to 2015, 53 percent involved victims who practiced African-originated religions. Print media published more than half of these stories, 212, in 2015, a sharp increase from the 84 published in 2014 and 45 in 2013.

SDH requested data on reported incidents of religious intolerance from 113 ombudsmen offices; only 37 responded to the inquiry. Of these 37 offices, 14 reported they had received 1,031 complaints of religious violence and intolerance during the reporting period. The largest proportion of victims – 27 percent – professed to practice African-originated religions, and 83 percent of all reported incidents took place in private homes.

On January 21, the National Day to Combat Religious Intolerance, the federal government hosted a panel discussion in which the representative of the Ministry of Culture's Palmares Foundation – mandated to promote and protect the country's culture of African descent – spoke about the link between racism and cases of religious intolerance. The Palmares Foundation launched a new national Network for Protection of Victims of Religious Intolerance at the event.

In July the city of Sao Goncalo completed demolition of the home where Brazilians founded the African-originated religion known as Umbanda. The city first scheduled demolition of the house in 2011. The CCIR stalled complete demolition for five years while it led preservation efforts, lobbying the city mayor, the governor of the State of Rio de Janeiro, the Office of the President, and the Institute of National Historic and Artistic Heritage. The Office of the President has yet to deliver on promises to build an Umbanda Museum at the site.

Although religious instruction was optional, a large portion of public schools considered it mandatory and continued not to offer alternatives or opt-out options for students. The SDH Report on Religious Intolerance and Violence in Brazil found 25 percent of 110 legal cases from 2011 to 2015 concerned incidents that occurred in schools.

The federal government launched national public awareness campaigns on social media to highlight respect for racial equality and religious plurality. #AcrediteNoRespeito (I believe in respect) and #SouFilhoDoBrasil (I am a child of Brazil) were hashtags used to underscore the cultural importance of African-originated religions. The federal government created a new website to raise awareness about religious diversity and intolerance. Another initiative included capacity building and training for government officials, particularly in law enforcement to assist them in understanding crimes involving religion. In November the state government of Paraiba, for example, carried out training on

combating racism and religious intolerance in the city of Joao Pessoa for members of the civil police units that work in the Integrated Operations Center.

The CNRDR identified ensuring safe spaces for refugees of various religions to practice their faiths, and maintaining respect for the country as a secular state as their goals. In April the Committee released a statement expressing concern for the “depredation of spaces of worship of religions of African origin.”

A number of state and municipal legislatures held public hearings on combating religious intolerance. In a hearing in the Federal District of Brasilia, the governor cited the creation of a specialized police station to receive reports of crimes related to discrimination on the basis of race, sexual orientation, and religion. The Federal Public Ministry in Rio Grande do Sul State held a hearing to develop practices to combat what it characterized as the “trivialization” of public demonstrations of political and religious intolerance.

The Rio de Janeiro city government launched the Municipal Office for the Respect of Religious Diversity in May. Representatives of religious groups and local NGOs (including the CCIR, the NGO responsible for the Annual Walk in Defense of Religious Freedom in Rio de Janeiro) criticized the city government for filling the office’s 19 positions with individuals they said were political allies who lacked experience and technical knowledge of religious affairs. The representatives said the lack of dialogue between the city government and civil society before the office opening called into question the legitimacy of the initiative.

The report also analyzed 110 legal cases. Contrary to the trend exhibited in print media stories, 45 percent of the victims in the cases examined were Adventist while only 7 percent were practitioners of African-originated religions. The cases included a Seventh-day Adventist college student in Sao Paulo who requested makeup sessions for night classes missed because of the Adventist observance of the Sabbath. Similarly, the Center for Jewish Education requested an alternative date for the National Secondary School Examination on behalf of 22 Jewish students because the original exam date coincided with Shabbat; the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in both cases. In another case, the Federal Public Ministry sued Google Brazil to secure the immediate removal from YouTube of videos that fostered prejudice against African-originated religions; the Ministry also asked for the identities of the account holders responsible for posting the videos for possible criminal investigation.

The SDH report recommended more awareness raising campaigns about institutional resources, highlighting the low number of complaints filed with ombudsmen as an example of the disconnect between the general population and public institutions available to provide assistance. The report cited the 12th National Conference on Human Rights, which took place in Brasilia in April, during which participants shared the difficulty of filing formal complaints of religious violence and intolerance at police stations and public prosecutors' offices throughout the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Between January and September SDH's Dial 100 human rights hotline registered 300 complaints related to cases of religious intolerance, exceeding the 252 total complaints during 2015. The CCIR released in January a national report that revealed that 70 percent of religious intolerance cases in the State of Rio de Janeiro during the period July 2012 to August 2015 were directed against practitioners of African religions. In April CNRDR expressed concern about an increasing trend of religious intolerance and called for respect of religious beliefs and the secular state.

In April an Ubanda practitioner stabbed his evangelical Christian neighbor for lighting candles that he said would bring "negative vibrations." The victim was admitted to the hospital with non-life-threatening injuries; the assailant was detained by police.

In August a group of unidentified men broke into a temple for the practice of an African-originated religion in Nova Iguaçu (Baixada Fluminense, on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro), destroying religious images and statues and burning the temple to the ground. The person responsible for the temple stated the attack was motivated by religious intolerance. Police registered the incident as a case of domestic break-in instead; the police were investigating the case at year's end.

Civil society representatives and government officials continued to state that religious intolerance was often related to racism.

Givania Maria da Silva, the former Secretary for Traditional Community Policies of the former Ministry of Women, Racial Equality, and Human Rights, attributed acts of aggression against African-originated religions to historical religious

discourse that demonized these religions for polytheism, deities of various genders, and racism.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The Ambassador discussed interfaith dialogue and religious tolerance in meetings with the president and secretary general of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops (CNBB) and the Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, among others. Embassy officials met with CNRDR to discuss tolerance and religious diversity. U.S. officials also met with the president of the Palmares Foundation of the Ministry of Culture to learn about its initiative to promote respect for the practice of African-originated religions in the country.