

URUGUAY 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and affirms the state does not support any particular religion. Legal statutes prohibit discrimination based on religion. The government launched an interagency, computer-based system to monitor and report on issues of discrimination, including discrimination based on religion. A judge sentenced four individuals to probation for aggravated violence and hate crimes after they were convicted of physically and psychologically attacking a colleague on religious and racial grounds. Two Jewish travelers were denied entry into a hostel. The government condemned the act, referred the case to the interagency antidiscrimination committee, opened an investigation, and closed the hostel. Some government officials made public statements and wore clothing disparaging the beliefs and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. In November media reported that Minister of Education Maria Julia Munoz called evangelical Protestant churches “the plague that grows” in a WhatsApp group. The government’s official commitment to secularism at times generated controversy between religious groups and political leaders. Religious organizations welcomed opportunities for dialogue with the government on religious freedom. The installation of religious monuments in public places continued to generate tensions. The government approved two cemetery sites for the Islamic community. The government supported several events commemorating the Holocaust, including one held in the parliament and through a nationally broadcast message.

On November 22-24, evangelical Protestant leaders attended the Regional South American Congress for Life and Family in Punta del Este. According to media reports, on November 23, a church in Montevideo supporting the congress was vandalized with what the church said were satanic symbols and pro-LGBTI signs as well as paintings saying “no to the fascist congress.” Media also reported that on March 8, protesters vandalized a church, stating their disagreement regarding the Catholic Church’s position on abortion and birth control. Unidentified individuals vandalized a plaza in Cerro Largo Department with painted swastikas. Civil society and the government responded quickly to condemn the acts. Jewish leaders reported acts of anti-Semitism, including verbal harassment and aggressive behavior. Representatives of some minority religious groups stated that society’s lack of knowledge and understanding of their religious beliefs sometimes led to acts of intolerance and discrimination. Religious representatives reported continued activity in the press and in social media disparaging their religious beliefs and practices. Such activity included a Catholic leader’s comments in a

magazine that Afro-Umbandists characterized as disparaging their religious beliefs. Religious coalitions continued to promote interfaith dialogue, understanding, and coexistence in the country.

U.S. embassy officials maintained contact with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Forms of Discrimination (CHRXD), and the National Human Rights Institute (INDDHH) to discuss issues regarding religious freedom and discrimination. Embassy officials met with religious leaders, including Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim representatives, several other minority religious groups, and members of the Board for Interfaith Dialogue to discuss areas of interfaith collaboration and hear concerns on faith-related issues, including acts of vandalism related to religion, tensions between the government and religious organizations, and challenges to religious freedom and tolerance. The embassy used social media to highlight the importance of respect for religious diversity and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 3.4 million (July 2018 estimate). According to a 2014 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, 57 percent of the population self-identifies as Christian (42 percent Catholic and 15 percent Protestant), 37 percent as religious but unaffiliated, and 6 percent as other. Groups together constituting less than 5 percent of the population include Jehovah's Witnesses, Baha'is, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), the Valdese Church, Afro-Umbandists (who blend elements of Catholicism with animism and African and indigenous beliefs), Buddhists, members of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), Brahma Kumaris, and others. According to the survey, 0.3 percent of the population is Jewish and 0.1 percent Hindu. Jewish organizations state there are approximately 20,000 Jews living in the country (approximately 0.6 percent). A 2014 Pew Research Center survey states 0.1 percent of the population self-identifies as Muslim. Civil society experts estimate there are only between 700 and 1,500 Muslims (0.02 to 0.04 percent), mostly living near the border with Brazil.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and states, “The State does not support any particular religion.” The penal code prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The constitution accords the Catholic Church the right to ownership of all its churches built wholly or partly with previous state funding, with the exception of chapels dedicated for use by asylums, hospitals, prisons, or other public establishments.

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

During the year, the government transitioned from an inquisitorial system of justice to an accusatory justice system. According to the government, the change aimed to address inefficiency, opacity, and the overuse of pretrial detentions, and to establish a more fair and transparent judicial system that provides greater advocacy to victims. Of the approximately 8,300 cases processed from the switch to the accusatory system through August, 79 percent went through alternative dispute resolution processes. The new criminal procedure code was reformed through additional legislation that amplified police discretion in the first moments of detention and in the investigations phase and also suspended precautionary measures.

Each local government regulates the use of its public land for burials. Many departments (equivalent to states) allow the services and rites of all religions in their public cemeteries.

The INDDHH, an autonomous branch of the parliament, and the MEC’s CHRXD enforce government compliance with antidiscrimination laws. Both organizations receive complaints of discrimination, conduct investigations, and issue rulings on whether discrimination occurred. These rulings include a recommendation on whether cases should receive a judicial or administrative hearing. Only the courts or the Ministry of Labor may sanction or fine for discrimination. The INDDHH and the CHRXD provide free legal services to complainants.

A correctional authority protocol regulates religious issues in prisons, including standardizing access for religious officials and religious meeting spaces. Several prisons in the country have a dedicated space for religious practices.

The constitution prohibits religious instruction in public schools. Public schools close on some Christian holidays. In deference to its secular nature, the government does not refer to holidays by their Christian names. Students belonging to non-Christian or minority religious groups may be absent from school on their religious holidays without penalty. Private schools run by religious organizations may decide which religious holidays to observe.

For religious workers to work in the country, they must provide certification from their church to confirm the identity of the applicant and to guarantee financial support. According to regulations, the state must enforce these standards equitably across all religious groups.

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

Government Practices

The CHRXD report covering incidents of discrimination during the year included one complaint relating to freedom of conscience and religion; in 2017 there was also one complaint. The INDDHH reported two incidents of discrimination on religious grounds in its 2017 report; there was one complaint the previous year. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs managed the System for the Monitoring of Recommendations, an interagency, computer-based tool to monitor and report on human rights issues, including discrimination based on religion.

A judge sentenced four gasoline station employees working in Montevideo to four to six months of probation for physically and psychologically attacking a colleague with learning disabilities in June on religious and racial grounds. The individuals physically beat the victim while his hands were tied and at one point positioned him in a crucifixion pose. Capturing the event on video, his attackers mocked his religion, sang religious songs to him, and stuck tape to his forehead in the form of a cross. His attackers also said “this is how we treat black people in Uruguay.” Civil society organizations criticized the sentence as being too lenient for the crime. The four individuals were fired and charged with aggravated violence and hate crimes after they confessed in an abbreviated trial under the country’s new

accusatory system. The station owner filed the complaint after he saw viral footage of the attack on social media.

In January media reported the owner of a youth hostel denied two young Jewish travelers from Israel entry into his hostel in Barra de Valizas, Rocha Department. The hostel owner said they were “not welcome in his home” because he was “opposed to the political situation” in Israel. The Central Israeli Committee of Uruguay immediately issued a statement condemning the incident as an anti-Semitic act and calling for sanctions. The Ministry of Tourism issued a statement saying the incident contravened the country’s reputation as a country open to receiving individuals from around the world and referred the report to the interagency antidiscrimination committee. The committee acknowledged the case as a discriminatory act. A legislator filed a report with the Prosecutor General’s Office branch in Rocha Department to open an investigation. The governor of Rocha said the hostel was issued a demolition notice since it was not registered and did not have the proper authorizations. The Prosecutor General’s Office said the incident was an isolated case and was due to the tourists’ national origin, not their religion. The Central Israeli Committee, however, responded that it was a case of discrimination based on both nationality and religion.

Government officials made several public statements and wore attire that some Catholic leaders considered to be disparaging of their beliefs and of the practices of the Catholic Church. In July a local government official in Montevideo tweeted a message to promote the use of protection against HIV/AIDS, saying, “Fewer rosaries on the ovaries and more sexual and reproductive health, seriously.” Catholic Church members expressed alarm about the official’s tweet and expressed their concerns on social media. Local government authorities requested the official retract the tweet and offer a public apology, which the official did. In September State Health Administration Services Director Pablo Cabrera participated in the government’s annual Diversity March wearing a Catholic cardinal’s traditional attire in what some participants said was a mockery of religion. The Catholic Church, the President’s Human Rights Office, and several opposition legislators condemned the behavior.

Media reported in November Minister of Education Maria Julia Munoz called evangelical Protestant churches “the plague that grows” in a WhatsApp group. Deputy of the National Party Alvaro Dastugue denounced Munoz for having a “xenophobic and discriminatory position.” A member of the evangelical Protestant bench of parliament said he would ask President Vazquez to remove the minister.

In June the government officially declared March 19 as the date to annually commemorate secularism in the country, in accordance with a parliamentary law passed in 2017. Parliament said celebrating secularism was an element of the country's identity, embedded in the constitution and contributing to religious tolerance in society. Differing interpretations of the term "secularism" continued to lead to disagreements on the state's role in enforcing the country's secularism laws. In October an opposition party criticized Governor of Salto Department Andres Lima for receiving a blessing from an evangelical Protestant pastor in his office; his own party also criticized him. One legislator said that "Uruguay should not allow any religion to invade official government offices" and that Governor Lima should be held accountable for his lack of respect for the country's policy on secularism. Some members of Catholic and evangelical Protestant groups said government stances on sex education, gender, and abortion threatened their freedom of speech and the right to practice their religion.

Religious organizations said they welcomed opportunities for direct dialogue with the government on religious freedom; however, they reported there were few or no formal channels of communication with the government to raise concerns or discuss initiatives related to religious freedom. Religious leaders noted that the national government did not actively convene an interfaith dialogue, but some local government officials supported interfaith events through in-kind donations, financial contributions, or participation in events. Minority religious groups such as Baha'is, Muslims, Anglicans, Methodists, and the Church of Jesus Christ reported no cases of government-based discrimination or intolerance. They continued, however, to state the government demonstrated more interest in other religious groups, particularly Christian and Jewish groups.

According to press reports, decisions on the installation of religious monuments in public places continued to generate tensions between religious authorities and the government, as well as among different political parties. In October opposition council members of the Cerro Largo Department opposed the governor's installation of a Bible monument, because they stated it violated secularism and did not go through the proper channels of approval. During the year, local governments allowed the public placement of other statues and monuments of a religious nature. By year's end, the government had not yet made a decision on how to dispose of an 800-pound bronze Nazi eagle and swastika from a German World War II cruiser scuttled in Montevideo harbor following the 1939 Battle of the River Plate.

In May the government approved a request from the Muslim community to provide a space encompassing 360 square feet to accommodate 20 Islamic graves in the public North Cemetery in Montevideo. In June the Canelones Department government agreed to establish the country's first Islamic cemetery next to the public Soca Cemetery, with a total area of 27,000 square feet.

The government organized workshops throughout the year to raise awareness of societal discrimination and promote tolerance, including related to religion. In March to mark the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the INDDHH expressed its commitment to implement programs and training to eradicate discriminatory practices in society and promote respect for human rights including freedom of religion. During Diversity Month in September, the government committed to strengthening antidiscrimination public policies and promoting tolerance. The government organized a week of workshops to raise awareness on all forms of societal discrimination and promote tolerance. A portion of the event was specifically dedicated to democracy, secularism, and human rights. As part of Diversity Month, the government premiered a film titled *Faith in Resistance*, which documented religion during the 1973-85 dictatorship era in the country. The film was produced with support from the government and civil society organizations.

As in previous years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported activities to commemorate the Holocaust. Parliament organized a special session in January to honor Holocaust victims. Also in January the government issued a nationally broadcast message commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day. The "Shoah Project," an online educational tool on the Holocaust, had its annual contest during the year for high school students to raise awareness of Holocaust resistance fighters and of the continuing need to monitor and combat anti-Semitism.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

On November 22-24, approximately 400 participants, including professionals in politics, education, and social issues, as well as evangelical Protestant leaders, attended the Regional South American Congress for Life and Family in Punta del Este. Media reported the congress highlighted the danger of losing the freedom of conscience, religious freedom, and freedom of speech in the seven countries represented. Media also reported a church in Montevideo that supported the congress was vandalized on November 23 with what they said were satanic symbols and pro-LGBT signs as well as paintings saying "no to the fascist

congress.” The congress responded by “expressing our clearest repudiation of the acts of violence and intimidation performed by gender ideology activists against the Iglesia Mision Vida and the Uruguayan Christian Association of Health Professionals.”

Media reported that on March 8, masked women wearing witch hats vandalized a Catholic church with red paint bombs during a march commemorating International Women’s Day. Some protesters chanted “remove your rosaries from our ovaries” and “remove your doctrine from our vaginas” to express disagreement with the Catholic Church’s position on abortion and birth control. A priest from the church said he debated whether or not to file a report, remarking that “in previous instances when we have filed a report – nothing happened.” The Archbishop of Montevideo, civil society groups, and the INDDHH condemned the attack. In April after a second church was vandalized with red paint bombs and small fire bombs, the church filed a police report.

Media reported that in October unknown individuals vandalized areas of the city of Melo’s Constitution Plaza in the department of Cerro Largo. The individuals painted swastikas on structures and on national symbols within the plaza. The INDDHH quickly condemned the act, expressing concern and calling for a “culture of respect.” Local authorities took immediate measures to remove the graffiti.

Jewish leaders reported acts of anti-Semitism, including verbal harassment and aggressive behavior toward Jews. Representatives of some minority religious groups, including Baha’is, Anglicans, Methodists, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ, stated that society’s lack of knowledge and understanding of their religious beliefs sometimes led to acts of intolerance and discrimination. They informally expressed interest in including information about the different religions that coexist in the country and their contributions to society as part of the school curriculum.

Jewish, Catholic, and Afro-Umbandist representatives reported continued comments and activities in media and on social media sites disparaging their religious beliefs and practices. In April Catholic Cardinal Daniel Sturla made comments in a *Busqueda* magazine article about the Afro-Umbandist religion, stating that the *macumba* (a pejorative word used to describe black magic) is negative, damaging, psychedelic, and diabolical. Afro-Umbandist representative Mae Susana Andrade responded with a public letter in the press saying the cardinal offended African religions and that what was really diabolical was the number of cases of pedophilia in the Catholic Church, including in the country.

The Zionist Organization of Uruguay presented the 2018 Jerusalem Prize to the former head of the Supreme Court, Jorge Chediak, for his work to promote and defend the human rights of Jews and encourage peaceful coexistence among persons of different beliefs. The annual prize recognizes a prominent national figure, typically a representative from government or academia.

A Pew Research Center study released during the year indicated 29 percent of adults believed religion was very important in their lives.

The national chapter of The International Council of Christians and Jews celebrated its 60th anniversary, reflecting on its efforts to promote interfaith dialogue, tolerance, and coexistence in the country.

The Board for Interfaith Dialogue, a group of representatives from different religious groups and spiritual expressions, including Brahma Kumaris, the Church of Jesus Christ, Catholics, evangelical Protestants, and Baha'is, continued to promote interfaith understanding and foster respect for religious diversity through expanding opportunities for dialogue. During the year, the board organized forums open to the general public to promote religious freedom and human rights.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials discussed issues related to religious freedom and discrimination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the CHRXD, and the INDDHH. Embassy officials encouraged government representatives to engage in dialogue with all religious groups.

Embassy officials met throughout the year with religious leaders, including Catholics, Jews, and members of several other minority religious groups, as well as with members of the Board for Interfaith Dialogue, to discuss areas of interfaith collaboration and hear concerns about faith-related issues. These included acts of vandalism related to religion, tensions between the government and religious organizations, and challenges to religious freedom and tolerance. In addition, embassy staff participated in an August roundtable with representatives of several minority religious groups, including the Baha'is, Anglicans, Methodists, and Church of Jesus Christ. For the second year in a row, the Catholic University convened a roundtable of minority religion representatives to hear concerns regarding religious tolerance.

In January a senior embassy official participated in an International Holocaust Remembrance Day activity held in parliament. In November embassy officials joined members of the local Jewish community, interfaith leaders, and other diplomats, including the papal nuncio, for a memorial ceremony in honor of the 11 members of the Jewish faith killed in Pittsburgh on October 27.

The embassy used social media to highlight respect for religious diversity and tolerance, including during the July Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in Washington and for the commemoration of International Religious Freedom Day on October 27.