

URUGUAY 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and affirms the state does not endorse any specific religion. Legal statutes prohibit discrimination based on religion. The government's official commitment to secularism continued to generate controversy between religious groups and political leaders. Public schools did not offer courses on religion, although the law does not prohibit schools from offering such instruction. Religious organizations continued to emphasize the need for more channels of communication and opportunities for dialogue with the government to discuss issues related to religious freedom. In May, a local council member published an antisemitic post on Facebook, triggering criticism from members of his own and other parties that resulted in his resignation from his local council position. In January, the government broadcast a national message commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day in which Francisco Bustillo, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, referred to the Holocaust as the "most shameful and horrifying crime committed by men..." In December, an appeals court ratified a 2019 court ruling in favor of private parties who had found and wished to sell an 800-pound bronze eagle bearing a Nazi swastika recovered from the German battleship *Graf Spee*. Minister of Defense Javier Garcia said government officials would make sure the piece was bought only for pedagogic purposes and did not fall in the hands of neo-Nazis.

Jewish community representatives continued to report antisemitic press and social media commentary. Members of the Muslim community continued to state it was occasionally difficult to convince private sector employers to respect prayer times during work hours and to obtain permission to leave work early to attend Friday prayers. They stated they believed it was due to lack of knowledge of their religious practices, rather than discrimination. The Zionist Organization of Uruguay presented the 2021 Jerusalem Prize to Dr. Roberto Canessa for his work coordinating the arrival of Israeli doctors from Sheba Hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic. Religious groups continued to promote interfaith dialogue, understanding, and coexistence in the country.

U.S. embassy officials discussed the government's interpretation of secularism, the need for a government counterpart responsible for religious issues, and the importance of tolerance towards religious minorities and interfaith collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Honorary Commission against Racism and Xenophobia (CHRXD), which falls under the Ministry of Education and

Culture (MEC), the National Human Rights Institution (INDDHH), and officials from parliament. Embassy officials met with Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious group representatives to discuss their views on the government's position towards religion and religious groups and the impact of COVID-19 on their ability to practice religion. The embassy continued to use social media to highlight the importance of respect for religious diversity and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the country's total population at 3.4 million (midyear 2021). According to a 2014 Pew Research Center survey, 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. Minority religious groups 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, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), and Brahma Kumaris. According to the survey, 0.3 percent of the population is Jewish, 0.1 percent Hindu, and 0.1 percent Muslim. Other estimates of the country's Jewish population range from 12,000 to 30,000, according to the Jewish Studies department of ORT University and the National Israel Council, respectively. Civil society experts estimate there are between 700 and 1,500 Muslims, 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 law calls for an annual commemoration of secularism to be held on March 19.

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

Religious groups are entitled to property tax exemptions only for their houses of worship. To receive exemptions, a religious group must apply to and be approved by MEC as a registered nonprofit organization. The ministry routinely approves these registrations, after which the group may request a property tax exemption from the taxing authority, usually the local government.

By registering for official recognition and certification with MEC, religious groups can receive benefits, services, recognition, and tax reductions from the government. Religious workers must provide proof of certification from their affiliated religious institution to confirm the applicant's identity and to guarantee financial support of the sponsoring religious group. According to regulations, the state must enforce these standards equitably across all religious groups.

Each local government regulates the use of its public land for burials. Many departments (equivalent to states) allow burials, services, and rites of all religions in their public cemeteries. Public health regulations, however, require burial in a coffin.

The INDDHH, an autonomous branch of parliament, and the CHRXD enforce government compliance with antidiscrimination laws. Both organizations receive complaints of discrimination, conduct investigations, issue separate rulings on whether discrimination occurred, and provide free legal services to plaintiffs. 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.

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

Public schools do not offer courses on religion, although the law does not prohibit schools from offering such instruction. Public schools close on some Christian holidays. In deference to its secular nature, the government does not refer to holidays by their Christian names. For example, Christmas is formally referred to as "Family Day" and Holy Week is widely referred to as "Tourism Week." 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.

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

Government Practices

The government's official commitment to secularism and how it impacted religious groups continued to generate controversy among religious groups and political leaders. Differing interpretations of the term "secularism" continued to lead to disagreements on the state's role in enforcing the country's secularism laws. Throughout the year, several representatives of minority religious groups said government authorities often interpreted secularism as the absence of religion, rather than as the coexistence of multiple religions or beliefs and the independence of religion from the state.

With the stated goal of increasing understanding of the country's religious diversity, representatives of several religious communities, including Catholics, evangelical Protestants, Muslims, Brahma Kumaris, the Unification Church, Methodists, and the Church of Jesus Christ, continued to request the government include in the public school curriculum comprehensive information about different religions with a presence in the country.

In May, a local Frente Amplio (FA) party and council member in Rocha Department posted the following comment on Facebook regarding the Israel-Palestinian conflict: "Every day I ask myself whether Hitler was so wrong." Local council members strongly criticized the FA representative and demanded his resignation. His fellow FA members submitted the case to the party's political conduct tribunal and demanded he be suspended from his party functions until the tribunal made a final decision. Following this condemnation by his party, he subsequently resigned from his council position.

Some non-Christian minority religious groups reiterated they believed the government favored Christians, as evidenced by the government's renaming Christian holidays as official secular holidays, thereby automatically granting Christians time off from work to observe their holidays. The government, however, continued to not designate holidays of other religious groups as official holidays, making it necessary for followers of other religions to request a day off to observe their holidays.

In August, the government relaxed its COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, including the number of participants that could attend a religious service or event and the length of a given religious event. Some representatives of minority religious groups said they had not been included in the drafting of the protocols and that the

protocols favored some religious groups over others, such as the prescribed length of a church service.

Representatives of the Muslim community continued to report authorities rarely made appropriate meals available in public primary schools for Muslim children who observed halal restrictions.

Religious leaders praised the correction authority protocol standardizing access to religious counseling and religious meeting spaces and expressed the need to have similar protocols for other institutions.

Members of the Jewish community continued to say the government should issue regulations to allow alternate university-level exam dates for students observing religious holidays, instead of leaving that decision to individual professors.

The total number of cases of discrimination based on religion, released by the CHRXD, was not available at the end of the year. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs continued to manage the System for the Monitoring of Recommendations, an interagency, computer-based tool used to monitor and report on human rights issues, including discrimination based on religion.

In January, the government broadcast a national message commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day in which Minister of Foreign Affairs Bustillo referred to the Holocaust as the “most shameful and horrifying crime committed by men... It will always be a warning to the entire world of the dangers of hatred, fanaticism, racism and prejudice.” The Minister closed his speech saying, “Whenever we remember the Holocaust and its victims, we do so with the enormous sadness of what was suffered, but also as heirs of the endless love that they left us as legacy and that we keep alive from generation to generation. This is the true triumph, costly, painful, but full of faith and hope. Those who perpetrated such horror have ceased to exist; their victims bloom in memory and in every smile of a child.”

In December, an appeals court ratified a 2019 court ruling in favor of private parties who had found and wished to sell an 800-pound bronze eagle bearing a Nazi swastika recovered from the German battleship *Graf Spee*. The ship had been scuttled by the Germans in 1939. The ruling required the state to sell the piece and pay the private parties that had retrieved it. In July 2020, the Simon Wiesenthal Center had expressed concern regarding the 2019 ruling and had urged authorities to ensure that the display of these symbols would serve as a warning to future

generations of what should never be repeated. The center said that in light of the country's commitment to the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism, the government was obligated to prevent "the public use of symbols that recall ethnic cleansing." Minister of Defense Garcia said government officials would make sure the piece was bought only for pedagogic purposes and did not fall in the hands of neo-Nazis. By year's end, dealers had not auctioned the eagle.

On November 9, President Lacalle Pou and other government officials and politicians, along with human rights activists, attended the Central Israelite Committee's commemoration of the 1938 Night of Broken Glass (Kristallnacht). Several participating government officials and politicians later posted online about the commemoration, emphasizing the need to remember and reflect, and to foster tolerance and coexistence.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Jewish representatives continued to report antisemitic press and social media commentary, to include Holocaust denial.

Members of the Muslim community continued to state it was occasionally difficult to convince private sector employers to respect prayer times during work hours and to obtain permission to leave work early to attend Friday prayers. They stated they believed it was due to lack of knowledge of their religious practices, rather than discrimination.

The Zionist Organization of Uruguay presented the 2021 Jerusalem Prize to Roberto Canessa, a prominent pediatric cardiologist. Canessa received the award for his work coordinating the arrival of Israeli doctors from Sheba Hospital during the COVID-19 pandemic. The annual prize recognizes a prominent national figure, typically a representative from government or academia, for promoting and defending the human rights of Jews and encouraging peaceful coexistence among persons of different beliefs.

Although it was unable to meet during the year, 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, Jews, evangelical Protestants, Afro-Umbandists, and Baha'is, continued to promote interfaith understanding and foster respect for religious diversity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials discussed the government's interpretation of secularism, the need for a government counterpart responsible for religious issues, and the importance of tolerance towards religious minorities and interfaith engagement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, CHRXD, INDDHH, and officials from parliament. Embassy officials encouraged government representatives to engage in dialogue with all religious groups.

Embassy officials met during the year with religious leaders, including Catholics, Jews, evangelical Protestants, members of other minority religious groups, as well as with academics, lawyers, and human rights experts, to discuss interfaith collaboration and to hear concerns about faith-related issues. These individuals expressed their views on the government's position toward religion and religious groups and the impact of COVID-19 on their followers' ability to practice their religion.

On October 27, the embassy used social media to highlight respect for religious diversity and tolerance and to commemorate International Religious Freedom Day.