

# **AUSTRALIA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

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. In response to the shooting of a police officer by a Muslim youth, who was subsequently killed by police on the scene, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull called for unity and met with Muslim leaders. After the shooting, the prime minister and the opposition leader joined faith leaders to launch the National Day of Unity. The government ran extensive programs to support religious pluralism.

There were acts of vandalism against religious institutions such as mosques and religious schools and verbal abuse of Muslims in person or online. Some communities reported heightened tensions and growing concerns over the radicalization of individuals and support for extremist groups such as Da'esh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), including in the aftermath of acts of violent extremism overseas.

The U.S. embassy 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. Embassy officers at all levels, including the Ambassador, engaged with religious communities and promoted religious tolerance in person and through social media.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 22.8 million (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2011 census, 61 percent of residents are Christian, including 25 percent Roman Catholic and 17 percent Anglican, while 22.3 percent report having no religious affiliation. Eastern Orthodox adherents constitute 2.6 percent of the population; Buddhists 2.5 percent; 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. Among this group, 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

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themselves as Christian and an estimated 20 percent report having no religious affiliation.

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

#### **Legal Framework**

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. The constitution states “The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.”

There are certain legal limitations on the right to religious freedom, such as when necessary to protect public safety, order, and health, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. 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.

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 ethnoreligious background. South Australia is the only state or territory that does not explicitly prohibit discrimination on the grounds of religion. All other states and territories have independent agencies to mediate allegations of religious discrimination.

Religious groups are not required to register; to receive tax-exempt status, however, 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. To receive tax-exempt status, an organization must be a nonprofit entity. An organization’s activities, size, and permanence are some of the factors taken into account to determine its tax-exempt status.

The government permits religious education in public schools, generally taught by volunteers using approved curricula, with the option for parents to have their

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children not attend. There is no national standard for approving religious curricula, which happens at state and local levels. Public schools in New South Wales provide secular ethics classes as an alternative for students who do not attend optional scripture classes.

### Government Practices

In October a Muslim youth, allegedly inspired and radicalized by supporters of Da'esh, killed a police employee in the western Sydney suburb of Parramatta. The teenager was killed by police on the scene. Following the incident, Prime Minister Turnbull called for unity and met with Muslim leaders. Ten days after the shooting, the prime minister and the opposition leader reminded Australians of what they called the country's "core values" of diversity, tolerance, and unity, and joined more than 50 faith leaders to launch the National Day of Unity.

The New South Wales state government conducted an audit in September of extracurricular prayer groups at state schools to check adherence to Department of Education guidelines following allegations that extremist ideology was being preached in a Sydney high school during a lunchtime prayer group. Media reported that some schools suspended Islamic Friday prayers while the audit was being conducted. The government was still considering the completed audit at year's end.

Each session of parliament began with a recitation of a short prayer and then the Lord's Prayer, as has been the practice since 1901. Participation in the prayers remained optional. The Green Party and other groups called for the practice to end.

In August the Victoria government said it would remove religious instruction in public schools. This move was opposed by the interdenominational Christian organization that provided special religious instruction in Victoria schools, but was supported by the Australian Education Union. The religious education program is being replaced with a new curriculum that aims to help students understand global cultures and traditions, recognize and prevent family violence, and appreciate and understand diversity.

The state of Victoria's Civil and Administrative Tribunal upheld the June decision of the local council to allow construction of a mosque in the town of Bendigo.

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After the tribunal's decision, there were a number of protests – some violent – targeted against the local council. The construction was challenged by local residents, reportedly mainly because of neighborhood planning and zoning issues, as well as by nonresidents from other parts of Australia opposed to the construction of mosques in general. In September the Court of Appeals rejected an application for an injunction to prevent construction from starting. An appeal of the ruling was heard November 6, but the case remained pending at year's end.

A program established in 2014 continued to provide government funding for security installations – such as lighting, fencing and closed-circuit television cameras – and for the cost of employing security guards, to protect schools and preschools facing a risk of attack, harassment, or violence stemming from racial or religious intolerance. This funding was available at both government and non-government schools, including religious schools.

The government Australian Multicultural Council continued to provide guidance to the government on multicultural affairs policy and programs. The government's national multicultural policy, *The People of Australia*, was based on a government-wide approach to maintaining social cohesion and included religious tolerance as a component. The government provided a range of programs to promote religious tolerance that focused on youth outreach and early intervention, education, and “deradicalization” for prison inmates convicted of terrorism-related offenses.

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

In February vandals sprayed white supremacist graffiti on a Perth mosque. In April a mosque in Toowoomba was the target of an arson attack which reportedly caused hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage. In February a passing motorist in Melbourne allegedly verbally abused a 14-year-old Muslim girl. In April a woman on a Sydney train was reported having verbally abused a Muslim family; the family praised another passenger for intervening against the woman. In May two men verbally abused three Muslim women on a Melbourne train for wearing headscarves and punched another man in the face when he came to their defense. Police subsequently arrested a 20-year-old suspect.

In its 2015 anti-Semitism report, the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ) reported 190 anti-Semitic incidents from October 1, 2014, through September 30, 2015, down from 312 reported the previous corresponding period.

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Incidents included eight episodes of assault in which eggs or water balloons were thrown at people standing by a Jewish school or synagogue; 119 episodes of harassment or intimidation, including the use of profane language or gestures; and a number of incidents involving graffiti and property damage and vandalism, such as anti-Semitic graffiti along the walls above a pedestrian and bike path in Sydney, at a Jewish institution in Perth, and the home of a Jew in Melbourne. The ECAJ report said no seriously life-threatening anti-Semitic events occurred during the year.

In March the federal government announced security funding for 17 Jewish schools and 15 Islamic schools. In September Victoria's largest Jewish school announced it would employ armed guards. The principal stated "this enhancement of the guards' equipment reflects the heightened security levels now in place across Australia and worldwide, and is not in response to any particular threat to the College."

In August a new political party, the Australian Liberty Alliance, became established and gained attention in the press for its anti-Islam stance. It announced it favored banning full face coverings in public, and under the section of its manifesto entitled "Stop the Islamisation of Australia," called for a 10-year moratorium on resident visa applications by people from member countries of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Religious tolerance advocates and far-right nationalists who oppose the spread of Islam held competing peaceful demonstrations during a number of Melbourne and Sydney rallies. The police presence at many of these events outnumbered the protesters.

In the aftermath of the Paris bombings in November, eight people, including six in Victoria, were arrested following rival anti-Islam and pro-diversity protests in state capitals nationwide. Anti-Islam rallies organized by the anti-immigration Reclaim Australia group in Sydney, Brisbane, Canberra, Perth, Hobart, Adelaide, and Melbourne were opposed by antiracism groups, who held their own protests at the same locations. The largest rally (approximately 500 people on each side) was in Melbourne, where Reclaim Australia and local residents protested the planned construction of a mosque. Police made six arrests for minor offenses including possession of a knife and animal cruelty (for punching a horse).

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In the wake of the Lindt Cafe incident in downtown Sydney in December 2014, in which a Muslim man took the occupants of the cafe hostage resulting in the death of two of the hostages, the media reported an initial social media-based backlash against Muslims. Domestic and international media, however, also reported on the more rapid, larger spread of the hashtag #illridewithyou on social media. The idea was sparked by an individual who offered to ride with Muslim women who felt frightened to wear the hijab while riding public transport shortly after the Lindt Cafe incident. The hashtag appeared more than 250,000 times on social media within three days, with many celebrities and public figures voicing support for the campaign, which was seen as a show of support for the Muslim community and religious tolerance.

Several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) promoted tolerance and better understanding among religious groups. These included the Columban Centre for Christian-Muslim Relations, the National Council of Churches in Australia, the Australian Council of Christians and Jews, and the Jewish Christian Muslim Association of Australia.

In November the Lebanese Muslim Association in Australia, supported by the Australian Department of Social Services, sponsored the second annual National Mosque Open Day. The goal of this event was to facilitate a greater understanding of Islam and Muslims in Australia by opening up mosques to the wider public. The Australian treasurer and the opposition leader visited a mosque in west Sydney, commending Muslim leaders for helping counter mistaken and negative images about Muslims.

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

The U.S. embassy and U.S. Consulates General in Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney met with government officials to promote religious freedom and tolerance. They also engaged a wide range of religious leaders, faith communities, and groups. The embassy and consulates general used social media platforms to increase awareness of U.S. policy and activities supportive of religious freedom. For example, when television presenter Waleed Aly discussed the importance of maintaining and promoting social cohesion in the wake of the 2015 Paris attacks, the embassy and consulates shared his remarks as “ideas worth sharing.”

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In October the Ambassador hosted an interfaith picnic partnering with local organizations promoting religious tolerance to bring together young leaders in the local community from a variety of religious groups, including Sikhs, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Catholics, Buddhists, Bahais, and Anglicans. The event was designed to foster positive relationships among youth in these communities and among the communities themselves. Through photo sharing, the embassy's Facebook and Twitter feed provided illustrations of positive engagement among different religious groups at the event.

In the wake of the 2014 vandalizing of the Islamic Center in Canberra, the Ambassador contacted officials at the center and remained in touch with them throughout the year in person as well as via phone and email to undergird the embassy's support of religious freedom and tolerance. An iftar in July hosted by the Consulate General in Sydney included individuals from NGOs, government, education, and grass-roots community organizations. Participants stated that religious freedom and tolerance was vital to stable, secure communities. Representatives of the consulate general stressed the importance of continued support for religious freedom in meetings with senior community representatives.

In January the Consul General in Melbourne and the Ambassador, along with a local member of parliament, hosted an event that brought together Afghan elders and youth leaders from Victoria. The event provided an opportunity to discuss the challenges faced by Afghan community, including incidents of anti-Muslim sentiment and countering violent extremism among marginalized youth. The event also emphasized the importance of religious freedom in strengthening bonds between people and groups.

The Consul General in Perth hosted an interfaith event attended by senior leaders and members of the Muslim, Jewish, Catholic, Hindu, Christian, and Bahai communities. The theme was the importance of all faith communities working together positively and constructively to promote religious freedom and prevent violent extremism.