

BOLIVIA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution stipulates the state is independent of all religion and provides for “freedom of thought, spirituality, religion and cult, expressed individually or collectively, in public and in private.” The constitution and other laws give educational institutions the right to teach religion and indigenous spiritual belief classes. Some religious organizations, led predominantly by evangelical Christian denominations, expressed concern that a law proscribing religious registration requirements could threaten their ability to operate independently and could favor particular religious groups. The petition they submitted to the constitutional court demanding a ruling on the constitutionality of the law remained pending. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) suspended implementation of the registration legislation until the court rules.

While there were no acts of vandalism reported during the year, Jewish leaders reported police still had not investigated acts of vandalism against Jewish religious sites that occurred in 2014. Muslim leaders reported incidents of discrimination toward their followers, including being spat upon and anti-Muslim graffiti near their mosque.

U.S. embassy representatives met regularly with leaders of religious groups to discuss their relations with the government and religious freedom. The Charge d’Affaires hosted an interfaith roundtable in October to hear the concerns of religious leaders and discuss possible steps for mediation.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the population at 10.8 million (July 2015 estimate). In the 2001 national census, the latest to collect information on religious affiliation, 78 percent of the population identified as Roman Catholic and 16 percent as evangelical or other Protestant. Approximately 3 percent identified with smaller Christian groups and 2.5 percent self-identified as nonbelievers. There are fewer than 300 Muslims and approximately 500 Jews. According to a June polling firm survey, 74 percent of those polled identified as Catholic, 22 percent as other Christian, 3 percent as agnostic or atheist, and 1 percent as other religions.

Many indigenous communities, concentrated in rural areas, practice a mix of Catholic and indigenous traditions.

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Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

According to the constitution, the state respects and provides for “freedom of thought, spirituality, religion and cult, expressed individually or collectively, in public and in private.” The constitution stipulates the state is independent of all religion. The constitution and other laws give educational institutions the option to teach religion and indigenous spiritual belief classes with the aim of encouraging mutual respect among religious communities. While religion classes are optional, schools must teach ethics with curriculum materials that promote religious tolerance.

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination, including in access to educational institutions, and protects the right of access to public sport and recreational activities without regard to religion.

The law requires religious groups to register with the MFA’s Office of Religion and Nongovernmental Organizations as nongovernmental organizations in order to operate legally. Religious groups must submit an annual report of their general activities as well as current membership rolls and financial records to the office to remain on the registry. Registered religious groups receive tax, customs, and other legal benefits.

The government may not deny legal recognition to any organization based on its articles of faith. There is no fee for registration, but the complex procedure typically requires legal assistance and several bureaucratic antecedents, such as registering the legal name of the organization, in order to register as a religious organization. Religious organizations must file a notarized listing of the names, identification numbers, tax certificates, and police files of national leaders, as well as notarized lists of names and identification numbers of their entire membership.

Government Practices

The registry of the MFA’s Office of Religion and Nongovernmental Organization counted 434 registered religious groups and several dozen religious groups in the process of submitting the necessary legal paperwork to be registered. Some

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evangelical Christian groups expressed concern that the government could apply the registration law selectively to revoke their religious institutions' tax-exempt status and limit their activities. This did not occur during the year. Critics of the registration law characterized the requirements in the law and the implementing decree as “an obligation to operate under a model of administration contrary to our own faith doctrines,” and they stated there was a double standard in registration processes for established religious groups versus new organizations. These evangelical groups reported they submitted a petition to the Constitutional Court in July 2014 to demand a ruling on the constitutionality of the law. The government, specifically MFA officials, met with evangelical groups to discuss their concerns during the year. Following these discussions, the MFA implemented a hiatus in the registration process pending a court ruling on the law.

Government officials often participated in interfaith meetings and religious ceremonies; some religious leaders said the government favored certain groups by inviting them more frequently to participate in official government ceremonies. Christian groups specifically alleged the government favored an Andean spiritual philosophy over other religious beliefs through public statements and ceremonies, and they stated this was a violation of the constitution's separation of religion and state. They used as an example Morales' January 22 swearing-in ceremony in Tiwanaku, which took place as part of an ancient indigenous religious ceremony, including a purification of the soul and body according to indigenous tradition.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Jewish leaders said their community was regularly associated with negative stereotypes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For example, an opinion columnist invoked the Holocaust in criticizing Israel, suggesting that had some Jewish children not been saved during the Holocaust, their descendants would not have lived and been “able to oppress the Palestinians.”

Muslim leaders stated their community was a target of discrimination. Incidents included being spat upon in public and the writing of anti-Muslim graffiti near their mosque. Evangelical Christians reported instances of forceful expulsions of their missionaries or pastors from rural communities by adherents of traditional Andean spiritual beliefs.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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Embassy staff often met with religious leaders to discuss their relations with the government. On October 29, the Charge d’Affaires hosted an interfaith lunch for religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues and to engage religious leaders in interfaith dialogue.