

URUGUAY 2022 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.

In November, an Afro-Umbandist group filed a complaint before the National Institution of Human Rights and Defense of the People (INDDHH), reporting a violation of religious freedom after police raided and interrupted a religious ritual that involved animal sacrifice. According to media reports, police acted upon the instruction of a prosecutor, who ordered the interruption of any activity causing animal suffering. The government's official commitment to secularism continued to generate controversy among 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 court reached an agreement with a high school teacher who denied the Holocaust on social media in 2020. In August, the teacher reiterated his denial of the Holocaust after a court determined in July that he had complied with the court's conditions and as a result, expunged his criminal record. In January, the government broadcast a national message commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day in which Minister of Foreign Affairs Francisco Bustillo referred to the Holocaust as the "most shameful and horrifying crime committed by men...." The Zionist Organization of Uruguay presented its 2022 Jerusalem Prize to President Luis Lacalle Pou for his contributions to strengthening friendship and ties between Uruguay and Israel.

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 a lack of knowledge of their religious practices, rather than discrimination. 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 freedom issues, and the importance of tolerance toward religious minorities and interfaith collaboration with a wide range of government officials. Embassy officials met with Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious group representatives to discuss their views on the government's position toward religion and religious groups. The embassy co-organized a religious freedom event with parliament in which the Chargé d'Affaires (Chargé) delivered opening remarks and senators representing the four major parties in the Chamber of Senators and an academic served as speakers. Representatives of all religious groups, legislators, government officials, and academic and diplomatic representatives attended the event, which drew attention to representatives' concerns for religious freedom in the country.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the country's total population at 3.4 million (midyear 2022). 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 African and Indigenous traditional and ancestral religious 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 the Ministry of Education and Culture (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 the MEC, religious groups can receive benefits, services, recognition, and tax reductions from the government.

Foreign 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 Honorary Commission Against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Other Forms of Discrimination (CHRXD), a body comprising officials of various government ministries and agencies and three NGOs appointed by the President and headed by an MEC

representative, 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 incidents of 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 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

In November, an Afro-Umbandist group filed a complaint before the INDDHH, reporting a violation of religious freedom after police raided and interrupted a religious ritual that involved animal sacrifice. According to media reports, police acted upon instruction of a prosecutor, who ordered the interruption of any activity causing animal suffering. The Afro-Umbandist group explained that sacrificing animals, which are often eaten later, was part of its religious ritual and belief and had been going on for decades. It also said the number of police cars that arrived at the scene was more appropriate for a drug raid than for a religious ritual.

In May, a court reached an agreement with a high school teacher who in December 2020 made several social media posts denying the existence of the Holocaust. At the time, the Central Israelite Committee filed a complaint with the

INDDHH denouncing the teacher, and the Prosecutor's Office investigated the complaint with support from the Information and Intelligence Office of the Ministry of Interior. The agreement stated the teacher had to publish social media posts recanting his statements denying the Holocaust and apologizing to the Jewish community. In addition, he had to visit the country's Holocaust Museum. In July, a court resolution determined the teacher had complied with the agreement's conditions, and authorities expunged his criminal record. In August, however, the teacher published a letter to the editor in a widely distributed local newspaper reiterating his statements denying the Holocaust. The Central Israelite Committee did not pursue additional action.

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 over 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.

Religious organizations requested the government include questions about religion in the population census, to be conducted in 2023, to have better data on religious identity that could be used when designing public policy.

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 debate whether to ask the government to include in the public school curriculum comprehensive information on different religions with a presence in the country.

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

Representatives of the Muslim community continued to report that 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 in prisons and expressed the need to have similar protocols for other institutions such as juvenile detention centers and mental health facilities.

Members of the Jewish and Seventh-day Adventist communities continued to say the government should issue regulations to allow alternate university-level examination dates for students observing religious holidays or days of rest, instead of leaving that decision to individual professors. A report from one Seventh-day Adventist noted that even in cases when a university allowed a student to take an examination on an alternate date, the test was oral instead of the usual written one, which, she said, placed Seventh-day Adventist students at a competitive disadvantage.

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 stating, “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 February, the Ministry of Defense asked the Supreme Court of Justice to review a December 2021 appeals court ruling. The appeals court's ruling 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 2019 ruling required the state to sell the piece and pay the private parties that had retrieved it. In 2021, the Minister of Defense said government officials had appealed the lower court's ruling to ensure the piece was bought only for pedagogic purposes and did not fall into the hands of neo-Nazis. The Supreme Court's ruling remained pending at the end of the year.

On November 9, President Lacalle Pou and senior 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.

In September, the Zionist Organization of Uruguay presented the 2022 Jerusalem Prize to President Lacalle Pou, for his contribution to strengthening ties between Uruguay and Israel. 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.

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 a lack of knowledge of their religious practices, rather than discrimination.

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 to foster respect for religious diversity.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

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 toward 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.

During the year, embassy officials met with religious leaders, including Catholics, Jews, evangelical Protestants, and members of other minority religious groups, as well as with academics, lawyers, and human rights experts to discuss interfaith collaboration and to hear concerns regarding faith-related issues.

On October 25, the embassy cohosted an event in parliament on religious freedom, organized jointly with legislators and parliamentary staff. The event included senators from the four parties represented in the Chamber of Senators and a religious freedom academic as speakers; attendees included representatives of all religious groups, government officials, legislators, academics, and diplomatic representatives. Presentations and discussions focused on the main findings of the 2021 Department of State International Religious Freedom Report. The Chargé delivered opening remarks describing the importance of the report and the U.S. government's commitment to protecting religious freedom. The embassy used social media to highlight respect for religious diversity and tolerance and to commemorate International Religious Freedom Day.