

# AUSTRALIA

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and in practice the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom.

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy in Canberra and the U.S. consulates in Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney regularly engaged with a wide range of religious groups.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to the 2006 census, 64 percent of citizens consider themselves Christian, including 26 percent Roman Catholic, 19 percent Anglican, and 19 percent other Christian denominations. Buddhists constitute 2.1 percent of the population, Muslims 1.7 percent, Hindus 0.7 percent, Jews 0.4 percent, and all others professing a religion 0.5 percent.

According to the 2006 census, 5,206 persons, or less than 0.03 percent of respondents, reported practicing indigenous traditional religions. The 2006 census reported almost 64 percent of indigenous persons identify themselves as Christian, and 20 percent list no religion.

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

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. 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 sets a religious test for a federal public office. Although the government is secular, each session of parliament begins with a joint recitation of the Lord's Prayer.

Religious adherents who have suffered religious discrimination may have recourse under federal discrimination laws or through the court system and bodies such as the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. Federal laws that protect freedom of religion include the Racial Discrimination Act, the Human Rights Commission Act, and the Workplace Relations Act. The country accepts refugees fleeing religious persecution and is party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol governing refugees.

Commonwealth and state public service agencies are active in promoting religious tolerance in the workplace. Public service employees who believe they have been denied a promotion on religious grounds can appeal to the public service merit protection commissioner.

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 jurisdiction that does not explicitly prohibit discrimination on the grounds of religion. All jurisdictions, apart from South Australia, have established independent agencies to mediate allegations of religious discrimination.

Religious groups are not required to register; however, to receive tax-exempt status, nonprofit religious groups must apply to the Australian Tax Office (ATO). Registration with the ATO has no effect on how religious groups are monitored, apart from standard ATO checks.

In September the New South Wales parliament passed laws enabling police officers and certain other public officials to require the removal of face coverings for identification purposes. In August the Victoria state government announced that its existing laws were adequate for that purpose.

The government permits religious education in public schools, generally taught by volunteers using approved curricula, with the option for parents to have their children not attend. The government's National School Chaplaincy Program, established in 2007, provides annual support of up to A\$20,000 (\$20,800) and A\$24,000 (\$24,960) in remote areas for government and nongovernment school communities seeking to establish or extend school chaplaincy services. In 2011 the government provided a further A\$222 million (\$230.9 million) over three years for participating schools and 1,000 additional schools focusing on remote and

disadvantaged areas. A private citizen challenged the program's constitutionality; a high court decision was pending at year's end.

Public schools in New South Wales provide secular ethics classes as an alternative for students who do not attend optional scripture classes. The Catholic and Anglican archbishops of Sydney and the Islamic Council of New South Wales have opposed the classes, asserting that they attract students away from the traditional religion classes.

The federal government provides funding to private schools, the majority of which are faith-based.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Christmas.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

In June 2009 a local council approved plans to build an Islamic school in Hoxton Park, a Sydney suburb. A group of local residents contested the ruling, and the case was before the Land and Environment Court and the New South Wales Supreme Court at the end of 2011.

The government has extensive programs to promote respect for diversity and cultural pluralism. The country participates in the United Nations Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation for Peace and is a cosponsor of the Regional Interfaith Dialogue with Indonesia, New Zealand, and the Philippines. In 2008 the government established the Multicultural Advisory Council to provide advice on "social cohesion issues relating to Australia's cultural and religious diversity." The government delivered a range of products focusing on youth outreach and early intervention, education, and deradicalization of individuals convicted of terrorism-related offenses in prison.

In February the government announced a new national multicultural policy, "The People of Australia," which is built on a government-wide approach to maintaining a socially cohesive and harmonious society and includes religious tolerance as a component.

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

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Several nongovernmental organizations promoted tolerance and better understanding among religious groups in the country. These groups included the Columban Center for Christian-Muslim Relations, the National Council of Churches in Australia and its affiliated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission, the Australian Council of Christians and Jews, and the Affinity Intercultural Foundation.

An annual report on anti-Semitism by the Executive Council of Australian Jewry recorded 517 anti-Semitic incidents during the 12-month period ending September 30, compared with 394 over the comparable period in 2009-2010. The increase in incidents by more than 30 percent was due largely to a proliferation of “hate e-mail.” The total of 517 incidents was 80 percent lower than the annual tally recorded in 2008-2009.

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

The embassy in Canberra and the U.S. consulates in Melbourne, Perth, and Sydney regularly engaged a wide range of religious leaders and groups, hosting events such as movie screenings, dinners, roundtables, interfaith receptions, and lectures by prominent speakers. The ambassador hosted two iftar events—a youth-focused interfaith iftar dinner in Melbourne and a post-iftar diplomatic luncheon at his residence. Interfaith and multicultural events commemorated the 10th anniversary of 9/11. During the year, three young members of the Islamic community, including one of the country’s youngest imams, participated in U.S. government-funded exchange programs.