

ITALY

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 is no state religion; however, due to its sovereign status and historical political authority, the Roman Catholic Church enjoys some privileges not available to other religious groups.

There were occasional reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including incidents of anti-Semitism. Prominent social leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. government monitored religious persecution and discrimination in the country and promoted religious freedom by developing programs that share U.S. best practices with a range of Italian partners, including civil society groups and regional and municipal governments.

Section I. Religious Demography

An estimated 87 percent of native-born citizens were Roman Catholic in 2009; however, according to an independent research institute, in 2010 only 24 percent regularly participated in Catholic worship services. Less than 5 percent of the population consists of members of non-Catholic Christian groups, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, the Baha'i faith, and Buddhists. Significant Christian communities include Christian Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses, Assemblies of God, the Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), and other small Protestant groups.

Immigration continued to add large groups of non-Christian residents, mainly Muslims, from North Africa, South Asia, Albania, and the Middle East.

In 2011 there were reportedly 764 places of worship for Muslims (often officially labeled "cultural centers" and unofficially called "garage" mosques), concentrated in the regions of Lombardy, Veneto, Lazio, Emilia Romagna, and Tuscany. Roughly 90 percent of Italy's mosques are located in regions in the North, with the remaining 10 percent concentrated in the southern regions of Calabria, Campania,

and Puglia. The Jewish community is estimated at 30,000 and maintains synagogues in 21 cities.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The government recognizes the Holy See as a sovereign authority. Under the concordat with the Catholic Church, the state is secular but maintains the practice of state support for religion, which can also be extended to non-Catholic religious groups if requested. In such cases, state support is governed by legislation implementing the provisions of an *intesa* (accord) between the government and the religious group. An *intesa* grants clergy automatic access to state hospitals, prisons, and military barracks; allows for civil registry of religious marriages; facilitates special religious practices regarding funerals; and exempts students from school attendance on religious holidays. If a religious community so requests, an *intesa* may provide for state routing of funds, through a voluntary check-off on taxpayer returns, to that community. The absence of an *intesa* does not affect a religious group's ability to worship freely; however, the government does not always grant the *intesa* privileges automatically, and a religious community without an *intesa* does not benefit financially from the voluntary check-off on taxpayer returns.

The state pays Catholic religion teachers, but this financial support is not available to other religious communities. If a student requests a religion teacher of a non-Catholic religious group, that group could select a representative but has to cover the cost.

Non-Catholic groups with an *intesa* include the Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, Adventists, Assemblies of God, Jews, Baptists, and Lutherans. The government has also signed draft accords with the Buddhist Union, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, the Apostolic Church, the Orthodox Church of the Constantinople Patriarchate, Hindus, the Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, and the Adventists. Negotiations remained suspended with the Soka Gakkai, a Japanese Buddhist group.

The law provides all religious groups the right of recognition as legal entities and the right to be granted tax-exempt status. Insults against any divinity are

considered blasphemy, a crime punishable by a fine ranging from 51 euros (\$68) to 309 euros (\$413). There were no reports regarding enforcement of this law during the year.

Holocaust denial is a crime punishable by up to four years in prison.

A 2005 antiterrorism decree, which penalized those who attempted to hide their identity could, if enforced, affect those who choose to wear face-concealing attire such as the niqab (a face veil) or burqa (a loose robe covering the entire body, including the face and head); there were no restrictions on wearing the hijab (headscarf) in public. A seldom-cited 1931 law forbids individuals from hiding their identities, and a 1975 antiterror law requires persons to show their faces in public for security reasons.

Missionaries and other religious workers must apply for special religious activity visas prior to arriving in the country.

The Catholic Church has certain privileges regarding instruction in public schools. For example, the government allows the church to select Catholic teachers, paid by the state, to provide instruction in “hour of religion” courses taught in the public schools. Such courses are optional, and students who do not wish to attend are free to study other subjects or, in certain cases, to leave school early. While in the past this instruction involved Catholic priests teaching catechism, church-selected instructors may now be either lay or religious, and their instruction is intended to include material relevant to non-Catholic religious groups. The law provides funding for all private schools that meet government educational standards.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Easter Monday, Assumption of the Virgin Mary, All Saints Day, Immaculate Conception, and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom. The government provided funds for the construction of places of worship, granted public land for their construction, and helped preserve and maintain historic places of worship that shelter much of the country’s artistic and cultural heritage.

There were occasional reports that government officials or members of the public objected to women wearing garments that completely covered the face and body.

On October 14, during a hearing in Turin, a judge ordered a female official interpreter who was a Muslim to remove a veil that covered her hair, as prescribed by law. Rather than comply, she decided to leave.

Government officials were involved in a widely covered debate over draft legislation banning women from wearing the niqab or burqa in public. The drafters and supporters of the legislation argued the law is a means of protecting women's dignity and freedom, and offers them a means of integration into society. Many also argued the law would maintain public order and security. Opponents argued the ban is an inappropriate imposition of legal prohibitions on cultural traditions, and sought a compromise between what they view as respect for security and respect for religion. The draft was passed by the constitutional affairs commission and awaited approval by parliament at year's end.

No Muslim group was allowed to build a mosque in 2011. Muslims in many locations continued to encounter difficulties getting permission to construct mosques. Although local officials usually cited other grounds for refusing building permits, some Muslims asserted hostility toward their religion underlay the difficulties.

On January 10, the city council of Genoa voted against a Northern League (Lega Nord) motion blocking the construction of a mosque. The city authorized the building of a mosque on a piece of land provided by local authorities in 2009.

In September the Northern League deputy governor of Lombardy announced the intention to propose a regional law that would limit the construction of mosques and would introduce the possibility of calling a referendum on new projects. Such statements played upon public fears of Muslims and mosques and promoted the Northern League as a party "of the people."

In January the Northern League organized a referendum for consultation at the city level. Allegedly 99 percent of the 5,300 voters voted against allowing the new mosque. City of Turin officials approved plans in 2010 for a mosque that can accommodate up to seven hundred worshippers. On October 28, the Turin administrative court ruled that the appeal on building permits, submitted by the Northern League on March 7, was illegal. Work has not yet commenced. Milan, home to an estimated 100,000 Muslims, has several small "cultural centers" informally known as "garage mosques," but there is no true mosque within the city.

The continuing presence of Catholic symbols, such as crucifixes, in courtrooms, schools, and other public buildings continued to draw criticism and led to a number of lawsuits. On March 18, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights ruled that a crucifix is a primarily religious symbol, but its display is subject to the discretion of the states. This overturned its prior ruling, made in 2009, that had determined that the display of crucifixes in public schools violated the freedom of religion and right to education.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On December 20, the National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Holocaust was inaugurated in Ferrara.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

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

Anti-Semitic societal prejudices persisted, manifested largely by anti-Semitic graffiti in a number of cities. Individuals and small extremist fringe groups were responsible for anti-Semitic actions, including verbal assaults and anti-Semitic graffiti and Web sites. On January 6, prosecutors opened an investigation on a high school teacher in Turin, Renato Pallavidini, who was accused of inciting racial hatred for posting a photo of Benito Mussolini, insulting comments, and threats against Jews on his Facebook page.

In October the Italian Chamber of Deputies Committee for the Inquiry into Anti-Semitism released a new report on anti-Semitism in the country. The report cited a 2008 study by Italy's Center of Contemporary Jewish Documentation that estimates that 44 percent of Italians expressed attitudes and opinions "in some way hostile to Jews" and that 12 percent are "fully fledged anti-Semites." The report also documented the proliferation of anti-Semitic Web sites and the tendency for criticism of Israel to become illegitimate and anti-Semitic.

According to the Center of Contemporary Jewish Documentation, in 2010 there were more than 40 anti-Semitic Web sites. On January 18, a right wing Web site published a list of names of Jewish university professors it accused of proselytizing for the "Zionist cause." Postal police promptly shut down the Web site. In

December, a Web site targeted several well-known Italian Jews by posting their photos alongside hateful messages. The photos were taken down after the Rome Jewish Community reported the incident to the police. In addition the Web site contained several anti-Semitic cartoons, conspiracy theories, and the text of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Postal police promptly shut down the Web site.

The government's Office to Combat Racial and Ethnic Discrimination in the Ministry of Equal Opportunity reported that of 799 relevant calls received in 2011, 7 percent involved discrimination based on religious belief. A large percentage concerned episodes involving Muslims. On April 9, the police imposed a fine of 1,032 euros (\$1380) on the owner of a bar in Abano Terme who refused to serve a Moroccan claiming that the establishment was closed to all North African clients. The incident followed a scuffle between two North Africans that occurred the day before. A week later a reconciliation meeting took place between migrants and the local community.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials regularly met with the government as well as civil society and religious groups. The embassy and consulates continued to reach out to second-generation Muslim youth groups, providing small grants that promoted moderate voices through new media and communication training, and participating in exchanges for Muslim community leaders such as through the International Visitor Leadership Program. The embassy and consulates also worked with provincial and city government representatives, particularly in cities such as Milan, Bologna and Reggio Emilia, to involve them in programs on religious freedom. The exchange for Muslim youth leaders was amplified to reach a wider public through a blog written by participants and a follow-on webchat. Through Muslim community-focused events, such as roundtables and an Eid-al-Adha reception, the embassy and consulates brought leaders together to promote religious tolerance.