

BOLIVIA

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 of religious freedom.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. charge d'affaires and other embassy officials met regularly with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), as well as principal religious leaders from a variety of religious groups, to discuss church-state relations and the church's role in the provision of social services.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2001 census by the National Statistical Institute, 78 percent of the population identified themselves as Roman Catholic and 16 percent as Protestant or evangelical. Approximately 3 percent were members of smaller Christian groups, and less than 1 percent were non-Christians, including Muslims and Jews. The government's official registry of religious organizations includes 23 religious groups.

Many indigenous communities, concentrated in rural areas, practice a mix of Catholic and spiritual traditions. Some indigenous communities have incorporated traditional beliefs into Catholic ceremonies.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. According to the constitution, the state respects and provides for "religious liberty and spiritual beliefs, in accordance with its worldview." The state is independent from the church.

BOLIVIA

The constitution provides both individual and collective religious and spiritual rights and allows public and private religious services. The constitution gives educational centers the right to teach religion and indigenous spiritual belief classes as a way to encourage mutual respect between communities of faith. Discrimination in access to educational institutions on the basis of religious belief is prohibited and the right to access public sport and recreational activities without regard to religion is protected.

The government has encouraged the Catholic Church to continue its social welfare projects. Written agreements between the government and the Catholic Church, including a five-year framework agreement signed in August 2009, formalized the Catholic Church's extensive work in the areas of education, health, and social welfare.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) seeking to acquire legal representation, including religious organizations and missionary groups, must register with the governor's office of their respective state. Religious organizations and missionary groups also must register with the MFA's Office of Religion and Nongovernmental Organizations to receive recognition as religious associations. The current MFA registry counts more than 330 religious organizations. Religious organizations also must submit an annual report to the Religion and Nongovernmental Organization Office in order to remain on the registry. Religious groups that receive foreign sources of funding are not permitted to register as religious associations but may enter into a framework agreement with the government for three years that affords the same judicial standing as NGOs, including tax-exempt status.

Registered religious organizations receive tax exemptions. Registration is essential to obtain tax, customs, and other legal benefits. The ministry may not deny legal recognition to any organization based on its articles of faith and does not charge a fee for registration; however, the arduous procedure typically requires legal assistance.

As permitted by the constitution, some public schools provide religious instruction. By law, religion classes are optional, and school curriculum materials promote religious tolerance.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Corpus Christi, All Souls' Day, and Christmas.

Government Practices

BOLIVIA

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Due to the difficult registration process, some religious groups avoided official registration and operated informally. A 2011 news report found registration was very limited or nonexistent in the rural states of Oruro, Beni, and Pando.

Some students from smaller religious groups faced verbal harassment during religion courses in public schools. Religious leaders stated that other students, not state officials, were the source of the disparaging remarks. The leaders stated such acts were rare.

The government participated in interfaith meetings and worked directly with religious leaders. For example, President Evo Morales met with the president of the National Association of Bolivian Evangelicals to discuss proposed legislation to tax church proceeds.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Leaders from the Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jewish, and indigenous communities continued to hold interfaith meetings. A leader from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) reported the interfaith meetings were becoming more inclusive and that the interfaith group now invited his church to participate regularly.

Religious organizations, especially Catholic charities, continued to play a key role in social service provision. The country's religious registry reported the Catholic Church administered 74 percent of all religious charities, which included educational, health, and housing projects.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. charge d'affaires and other embassy officials met regularly with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as principal religious leaders to discuss church-state relations and church-administered social service programs. Embassy officials also attended interfaith meetings.