

# URUGUAY 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and affirms the state does not support any particular religion. Legal statutes prohibit discrimination based on religion. The government's official commitment to secularism continued to generate controversy between religious groups and political leaders. At year's end, the Prosecutor's Office continued investigating the case of a public high school teacher who published several social media posts denying the existence of the Holocaust. In March, the government suspended all public gatherings, including religious ones, in compliance with strict health protocols to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic. Some religious leaders questioned the government's authority to restrict their right to practice religion through decrees or protocols. According to some religious groups, the government did not consult with them on the drafting of COVID-19 measures, while it did consult with other religious groups, and that the protocols favored some religious groups over others. Religious organizations continued to underline the need for more channels of communication and opportunities for dialogue with the government to discuss issues related to religious freedom. In January, the government adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of anti-Semitism.

Jewish community representatives continued to report press and social media commentary disparaging their religious beliefs and practices. A Jewish couple received anti-Semitic and threatening comments from a man who sold them a book by a Jewish author through an online platform. The couple reported the incidents to legal authorities, who charged the man with hate crimes. At year's end, he was awaiting trial while under house arrest and with a restraining order from the couple. 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. 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 lack of a government counterpart responsible for religious issues, and the importance of tolerance towards religious minorities and interfaith collaboration with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Honorary Commission against Racism and Xenophobia (CHRXD), and the National Human Rights Institution (INDDHH). Embassy officials met with Protestant, Catholic, Jewish,

Muslim, other minority religious group representatives, and the Board for Interfaith Dialogue to discuss their views on government attitudes towards religion and religious groups and the impact of COVID-19 on their ability to practice religion. The embassy continued to use social media to highlight the importance of respect for religious diversity and tolerance.

### **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the country's total population at 3.4 million 2020 midyear estimate. 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 together constituting less than 5 percent of the population 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 animism and African and indigenous beliefs), Buddhists, the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), Brahma Kumaris, and others. 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, 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, with the exception of chapels dedicated for use as 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.

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 MEC's CHRXD enforce government compliance with antidiscrimination laws. Both organizations receive complaints of discrimination, conduct investigations, and issue separate rulings on whether discrimination occurred. 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 for discrimination. The INDDHH and the CHRXD provide free legal services to complainants.

A correctional authority protocol regulates religious issues in prisons, including standardizing access for religious officials and religious meeting spaces. Several prisons in the country have a dedicated space for religious practice.

The constitution prohibits religious instruction in public schools. 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 non-Christian or 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.

By registering for official recognition and certification with the Ministry of Education and Culture, religious groups are able to receive benefits, services, recognition, and tax reductions from the government. 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.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

At year's end, the Prosecutor's Office continued to investigate the case of a public high school teacher who published several social media posts denying the existence of the Holocaust. The Central Israelite Committee filed a complaint with the National Human Rights Institution denouncing the teacher and other persons who posted statements on Facebook and Twitter that denied the Holocaust and expressed other anti-Semitic sentiments. The Prosecutor's Office, with support from the Information and Intelligence Office of the Ministry of Interior, conducted two separate investigations following the complaint – one on the teacher and the other on individuals posting other anti-Semitic messages on social media.

The government's official commitment to secularism and how it impacted religious groups continued to generate controversy between religious groups and political leaders. Differing interpretations of the term "secularism" continued to lead to disagreements on the state's role in enforcing the country's secularism laws. Several representatives of 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.

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 request the government include in the public school curriculum comprehensive information about different religions with a presence in the country.

Some non-Christian minority religious groups said they believed the government favored Christians, as evidenced by the government's renaming Christian holidays as official secular holidays, thereby automatically granting Christians time off from work to observe their holidays. For example, Easter Week was officially called "Tourism Week," while Christians continued to refer to their holidays by their religious names. The government, however, did not designate religious holidays of other religious groups as official holidays, making it necessary for followers of other religions to request a day off to observe their holidays.

On March 1, during presidential inauguration ceremonies, President Lacalle Pou participated in an interreligious prayer service at the Catholic Montevideo Metropolitan Cathedral, where leaders of Catholic, Anglican, Armenian, and evangelical Protestant Churches, and of the Jewish community, dedicated prayers to the new President. The Presidency's social media accounts posted news of the event. Members of several political parties, including Frente Amplio and Partido Colorado, criticized the President's presence, and in particular the promotion of the event on the Presidency's social media platform as a violation of the principle of secularism, as established by the constitution.

On March 13, within a week of the country's first reported COVID-19 case, religious groups suspended all in-person services and events, in accordance with a government decree. On March 25, the Chief of Staff for the Presidency met with leaders of the main religious communities to discuss the suspension of religious services and ceremonies and limitations or modifications of other activities, such as volunteering and engaging in charity work. Participants included representatives of the Central Israelite Committee of Uruguay, the Uruguayan Israelite Community, the New Israelite Congregation, the Catholic Church, the Armenian Evangelical Church, and the Anglican Church.

Many religious groups held virtual services and celebrations while the government decree was in effect. Some religious leaders privately questioned the government's authority to restrict their right to conduct public religious activities through decrees and protocols. On June 19, the government authorized religious groups to conduct services and celebrations in-person if they followed specific health protocols, including limits on the frequency, duration, and size of gatherings. Although the government worked with religious leaders to draft the protocols, representatives of some religious groups expressed concern that certain protocols were not compatible with their religious observances, which required more than the permitted duration of 45-60 minutes. Some representatives of minority religious groups said they had not been included in the drafting of the protocols and that the protocols favored some religious groups over others. One group said it had requested authorities develop a tailored protocol to meet its needs, but that despite the government's initial positive response, its request remained pending at year's end.

In the state of Rivera, where press reported there was more than one COVID-19 outbreak resulting from gatherings of Afro-Umbandist and evangelical Protestant groups, authorities asked religious leaders to urge their followers to respect health

protocols, stating that was preferable to fining congregants or closing down places of worship.

A spike in COVID-19 cases in late December led to a virtual meeting among the Chief of Staff for the Presidency, the Minister of Health, and representatives of some religious groups. Following the meeting, the chief of staff announced they had reached an agreement to reinstate the suspension of religious gatherings until January 10, 2021. The Catholic Archbishop of Montevideo said the Church would comply with the government's decision, although it did not fully agree with the suspension, especially so close to Christmas. The Archbishop said the Catholic Church had been in strict compliance with pandemic health protocols during religious services, without any reported outbreaks. Representatives of some minority groups expressed discontent at not having been invited to participate in the virtual meeting.

A representative of Afro-Umbandists reported most leaders of their religious group had encouraged followers to refrain from in-person ceremonies since the outbreak of COVID-19 in March, given the special characteristics of their ceremonies, which involved holding hands, singing and dancing in close proximity, and sharing drinks. Afro-Umbandist leaders discussed a possible protocol with the Ministry of Health to resume their rituals, but they had produced only a draft proposal by year's end. In view of the upcoming *Iemanjá* celebration in February 2021, bringing thousands of persons to the coasts with offerings to the Sea Goddess, a leader of the group met with the Minister of Defense in December to discuss ways to lower the risk of contagion on public beaches during these rites.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights continued its review of a petition several evangelical Christian organizations filed in 2019. According to the petitioners, which included Mision Vida para Las Naciones, the government had made negative statements that had incited hatred against evangelical churches and had discriminated against them based on religious grounds.

According to Egyptian Center of Islamic Culture representatives, during the year there was no progress in developing land granted to the center in 2019 to build the country's first Islamic cemetery, located in Canelones Department. The delay was reportedly due to lack of funds. According to media, the Canelones Department government also needed to revise public health regulations to allow Islamic burials without a coffin.

Representatives of the Muslim community continued to report authorities rarely made appropriate meals available in public primary schools for Muslim children who observed halal restrictions.

Members of the Jewish community continued to say the government should issue regulations to allow alternate university-level exam dates for students observing religious holidays, instead of leaving that decision to individual professors.

The total number of cases of discrimination based on religion, released by the CHRXD, was not available at the year's end. 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.

Some members of Catholic and evangelical Protestant groups continued to say government approaches to sex education, gender, and abortion, as taught in public schools, threatened their freedom of speech and the right to practice their religion. According to some religious groups, government agencies, including the CHRXD and the INDDHH, did not prioritize the monitoring of discrimination based on religion, focusing instead on what the government considered other more "pressing" human rights concerns, such as the rights of persons with disabilities, Afro-descendants, the LGBTI community, women, incarcerated persons, and human rights violations committed by the state during the military dictatorship.

Religious organizations said they continued to welcome opportunities for direct dialogue with the government on religious freedom but said there were few or no formal channels of communication through which to raise general concerns or discuss initiatives regarding religious freedom. They said, however, a government official in the Office of the Presidency was available to discuss COVID-19 related issues as they pertained to religious groups. They suggested creating a government institution to address religious issues and to act as a link between religious groups and the state.

In January, the government adopted the IHRA working definition of anti-Semitism. Members of the Jewish community expressed their support for the government's adoption, including through press releases. As in previous years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported activities to commemorate the Holocaust, including high-level representation at events organized by the Jewish community. The government publicized Holocaust-related statements and events of religious organizations on its official website. Parliament organized a special session in

January to honor Holocaust victims. Also in January, the government broadcast a national message commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day in which Enrique Iglesias, renowned economist and Chair of the Holocaust Memorial Commission created by former President Tabare Vazquez in 2019, referred to the importance of preserving the memory of the Holocaust. Iglesias said, “The memory of the Holocaust is to be shared, condemned, and transmitted as a monument of ‘never again.’” Closing his speech, he stated, “Never Again will only be a reality when we are all able to recognize the universality of human beings in the specificity of each race, belief, or opinion; this should be the legacy left by the Holocaust for us to remember today.”

In July, the Simon Wiesenthal Center expressed concern regarding a judge’s 2019 ruling in favor of private parties who found and wished to auction an 800-pound bronze Nazi eagle bearing a swastika, stating the decision did not ensure the piece would be sold to institutions and individual bidders who wanted to raise awareness about the Holocaust and other instances of genocide, and that it did not ensure that a buyer would not use the item to glorify Nazism. The center urged authorities to ensure that the display of these symbols serve as a warning to future generations of what should never be repeated, stating that in light of the country’s commitment to the IHRA working definition of anti-Semitism, the government was obligated to prevent “the public use of symbols that recall ethnic cleansing.” By year’s end, the piece had not been auctioned.

On November 11, government officials, including President Lacalle Pou, politicians, and human rights activists, attended the Central Israelite Committee’s commemoration of the 1938 Night of Broken Glass (Kristallnacht). Several government officials and politicians posted online their participation in the commemoration and emphasized the need to remember and reflect, and to foster tolerance and coexistence.

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

Jewish representatives continued to report the occurrence of comments and activities in media and on social media sites disparaging their religious beliefs and practices, including anti-Semitic remarks and Holocaust denial. In November, a woman bought a book written by a Jewish author through an online platform. The seller requested the woman’s cell phone number to complete the transaction, but instead of delivering the purchase, she said he sent “hateful” messages, mentioning Zyklon B, the lethal gas used by Nazis in concentration camps. When the woman’s husband called the seller, the seller threatened him, making statements

such as “Hitler ran short,” and, “I will go to your home and kill you all.” The couple, fearful because the man had their address, reported the threats to authorities. The prosecutor handling the case charged the man with “acts of moral or physical violence, hate or contempt toward one or more persons as a result of their skin color, race, religion, ethnic or national origin, sexual orientation, or identity.” At year’s end, the man was under 60 days’ house arrest and a restraining order while the investigation continued.

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.

The Zionist Organization of Uruguay presented the 2020 Jerusalem Prize to Pedro Bordaberry, former Senator, Minister of Tourism, and presidential candidate for the Colorado political party. 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.

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 foster respect for religious diversity through expanding opportunities for dialogue and meetings, both virtually and in-person.

With the outbreak of COVID-19 and the resulting suspension of all in-person religious services, Jewish and Christian religious leaders joined together to produce an online video calling on their communities to maintain hope, stay home, and take care of themselves and others.

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

Embassy officials discussed the government’s interpretation of secularism, lack of a government counterpart responsible for religious issues, and the importance of tolerance towards religious minorities and interfaith engagement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the CHRXD, and the INDDHH. Embassy officials encouraged government representatives to engage in dialogue with all religious groups.

Embassy officials met during the year with religious leaders, including Catholics, Jews, evangelical Protestants, members of other minority religious groups, as well as with subject-matter experts, including academics, lawyers, and human rights experts, to discuss interfaith collaboration and to hear concerns about faith-related issues. These individuals expressed their views on the government's attitude toward religion and religious groups and the impact of COVID-19 on their followers' ability to practice their religion.

The embassy used social media to highlight respect for religious diversity and tolerance and to commemorate International Religious Freedom Day on October 27.