

ARGENTINA 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and laws provide for freedom of religion and the right to profess freely one's faith. The constitution provides the government will grant the Roman Catholic Church preferential legal status, but there is no official state religion. By law, public schools are secular, but private schools run by registered religious institutions are eligible for government subsidies. The government continued its investigation into the 1994 terrorist bombing of the Argentina Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) community center. In March the Criminal Cassation Court upheld a federal judge's petition to arrest Senator and former President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner on charges of "aggravated concealment" for allegedly attempting to cover up possible Iranian involvement in the AMIA bombing by signing a memorandum of understanding with Iran. At the September UN General Assembly (UNGA) meeting, President Mauricio Macri urged international support for the country's demands that Iran cooperate in the continuing investigation of the AMIA attack and the 1992 terrorist bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. Investigations into the murder of Alberto Nisman, the former special prosecutor in charge of the AMIA bombing investigation, continued. On April 17, a group of parents in Tucuman Province filed suit against a religious curriculum in the province's public schools, citing a 2017 Supreme Court decision that incorporating religious education in public schools was unconstitutional and stating that educators were exclusively teaching Catholicism in schools. The government sponsored and government officials actively participated in interfaith events throughout the year.

According to media reports, there was considerable civic debate on the separation of church and state in light of a draft bill legalizing abortion during the first 14 weeks of pregnancy, which the Senate voted down on August 9. Protesters supporting and opposing the draft bill, including from many religious groups, held massive and largely peaceful overnight demonstrations in front of congress before voting occurred on June 14 and August 9. Catholic and evangelical Christian churches reported offensive graffiti throughout the country that they believed individuals protesting religious opposition to abortion had written.

Embassy officials met with senior government officials, including the secretary of worship and officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) human rights office and Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, to discuss ways to promote respect for religious minorities and counteract religious discrimination. Embassy outreach

efforts included regular meetings with government officials and religious and community leaders to discuss interfaith collaboration and encourage the increased participation of religious communities in embassy-sponsored scholarship and educational programs. A Department of State official met with religious leaders and government officials, including parliamentarians, to discuss religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 44.7 million (July 2018 estimate). Religious demographic and statistical data from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), research centers, and religious leaders vary. According to a 2014 Pew Research Center study, Catholics constitute 71 percent of the population, Protestants 15 percent, and atheists, agnostics, and those with no religious affiliation 11 percent. Other sources state Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Methodists, and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) together total 3 percent of the population. According to the Pew study, the Jewish population is approximately 0.5 percent, and the Muslim population is estimated at 1 percent. Evangelical Christian communities, particularly Pentecostals, are growing in size, but no reliable statistics are available. There are also a small number of Baha'is, Buddhists, and adherents of indigenous religions in the country; however, no data are available on the size of these groups.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for the right to profess, teach, and practice freely one's faith. It declares the support of the federal government for "the Roman Catholic Apostolic faith," but the Supreme Court has ruled that it is not an official or state religion.

The government provides the Catholic Church with tax-exempt subsidies, institutional privileges such as school subsidies, significant autonomy for parochial schools, and licensing preferences for radio frequencies. The law does not require the Catholic Church to register with the Secretariat of Worship in the MFA. Registration is not compulsory for other religious groups, but registered groups receive the same status and fiscal benefits as the Catholic Church, including tax-exempt status, visas for religious officials, and the ability to hold public activities.

To register, religious groups must have a place of worship, an organizational charter, and an ordained clergy, among other requirements.

Registration is not required for private religious services, such as those held in homes, but is sometimes necessary to conduct activities in public spaces pursuant to local regulations. City authorities may require groups to obtain permits to use public parks for public activities, and they may require religious groups to be registered with the Secretariat of Worship to receive a permit. Once registered, an organization must report to the secretariat any significant changes or decisions made regarding its leadership, governing structure, size of membership, and the address of its headquarters.

The mandatory curriculum in public schools is secular by law. Students may request elective courses of instruction in the religion of their choice in some public schools, which may be conducted in the school or at a religious institution. Many Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious groups operate private schools, which receive financial support contingent on registration with the government.

Foreign religious officials of registered religious groups may apply for a specific visa category to enter the country. The validity period of the visa varies depending on the purpose of the travel. Foreign missionaries of registered religious groups must apply to the Secretariat of Worship, which in turn notifies immigration authorities to request the issuance of the appropriate documents.

The board of the National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Racism (INADI), a government agency under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, includes representatives of the major religious groups. INADI investigates suspected and reported incidents of discrimination based on religion. INADI is not authorized to enforce recommendations or findings, but its reports may be used as evidence in civil court. The agency also supports victims of religious discrimination and promotes proactive measures to prevent discrimination. INADI produces and distributes publications to promote religious tolerance.

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

Government Practices

In March the Cassation Court upheld a federal ruling against Senator and former President Fernandez de Kirchner on “aggravated concealment” charges, seeking

her arrest on allegations that the purpose of a 2013 memorandum of understanding the Kirchner administration signed was to cover up possible Iranian involvement in the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. Eighty-five persons died in the bombing. In November the lower court's request to lift her immunity from prosecution as a sitting senator expired after a senate's session did not achieve a quorum. While the new tribunal could issue a new request, the legislature could not take action on the measure until the onset of new congressional sessions in March 2019. Fernandez de Kirchner, her former Foreign Minister Hector Timerman, who died on December 30, and 11 others were indicted in December 2017 and awaited trial at year's end.

At the September UNGA, President Macri urged international support for the country's demands that Iran cooperate in the continuing investigation of the AMIA attack and the 1992 terrorist bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires.

In mid-November closing arguments ended in the AMIA community center bombing case seeking to establish local complicity in the 1994 incident, including charges against former President Carlos Menem and other former security and intelligence officials. The oral stage, which is the final stage of the trial, remained ongoing at year's end. In October 2017, Interpol renewed Red Notices seeking the location and arrest of five Iranians, one Lebanese, and one Colombian for their suspected roles in the AMIA bombing.

Judicial inquiries into the 2015 murder of Alberto Nisman, the lead federal prosecutor responsible for the investigation of the 1994 AMIA bombing, continued during the year. On June 2, a federal appeals court affirmed the lower court's preliminary finding that Nisman was murdered. In December 2017, a federal judge indicted Diego Lagomarsino, Nisman's former assistant, as an accessory to his death, as well as four security officials for criminal cover-up and failing to ensure Nisman's protection.

The Macri administration cosponsored with the Jewish community and the Israeli embassy, for the first time in 26 years, a public commemoration of the 1992 terrorist bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, and government officials expressed their commitment to transparency and pursuing justice.

On April 19, a group of parents in Tucuman Province filed suit against having a religious curriculum in the province's public schools, citing the 2017 Supreme Court decision that incorporation of religious education in public schools was unconstitutional and stating that educators were exclusively teaching Catholicism

in the schools. Political observers commented that provincial education laws in Catamarca, Cordoba, La Pampa, and San Luis Provinces had similar provisions that could come under judicial review. In December 2017, the Supreme Court ruled the incorporation of religious education in public schools in Salta Province was unconstitutional in a suit filed by the Association of Civil Rights and supported by parents and the Christian Alliance of Evangelical Churches in the Argentine Republic (ACIERA). According to media reports, the provincial government subsequently made efforts to remove obligatory religious education in public schools, although such classes remained optional in some schools.

Secretary of Worship Alfredo Abriani publicly prioritized the passage of a draft religious freedom bill, first submitted in 2017, but there was no action on the legislation by year's end. The bill would eliminate the requirement that non-Catholic religious groups register with the government to receive the same benefits accorded to the Catholic Church, allow for conscientious objection on the basis of religion, and protect religious dress, holidays, and days of worship.

On August 24, the Argentine Episcopal Conference (CEA), representing the Catholic Church, announced its intention to cease receiving certain public funds provided as direct financial support by the national government. On November 3, the group announced ongoing negotiations with the Macri administration to decrease such payments, primarily allocated for the salaries of Catholic bishops and seminarians. State-funded financial support amounted to approximately 152 million Argentine pesos (\$4.04 million) during the year, or 7 percent of the Church's annual budget. Although congress passed the 2019 national budget, it did not make public the government's allocations to the Catholic Church. Secretary of Worship Abriani stated the national budget would include allocations to the Catholic Church. Church representatives continued to discuss measures to reduce their dependence on federal funding.

Many Jewish groups said they viewed relations with the Macri administration as positive and productive. Close collaboration among these groups and the government continued, particularly in light of what they characterized as the administration's commitment to resolve the Nisman killing and to pursue justice in its investigations of the 1994 AMIA attack and the 1992 terrorist bombing of the Israeli embassy.

Secretary of Worship Abriani, the human rights secretary, the Buenos Aires director general for religious affairs, and other government representatives continued to host and attend religious freedom conferences, interreligious

dialogues, rabbinical ordinations, Catholic services, and Rosh Hashanah, Eid al-Adha, and Eid al-Fitr celebrations, as well as other religious activities, including those held by Protestant and Orthodox churches. On September 4-5, the City of Buenos Aires hosted the Third World Congress on Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue, aimed at promoting interreligious dialogue and understanding.

Participants included representatives from the Catholic Church, Orthodox Greek Church, Armenian Apostolic Church, Orthodox Episcopal Anglican Communion, and Church of Jesus Christ. Other attendees included the Latin American Rabbinical Seminary and the Islam for Peace Institute.

On August 22, Buenos Aires hosted an interfaith festival highlighting diverse religious communities in the country at the Costanera Sur convention center. The event sought to recognize and celebrate the religious diversity of Buenos Aires, according to local government officials.

On September 26-28, the government supported the fifth annual Group of 20 (G20) Interfaith Forum hosted by international religious and civil society groups. The conference considered the G20 2018 summit theme of “Building Consensus for Fair and Sustainable Development” from a faith-based perspective. Vice President Gabriela Michetti provided opening remarks.

From October 29 to November 1, 500 youth from more than 15 countries participated in the Third World Youth Meeting hosted by Jewish and other religious organizations with the support of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Technology.

INADI continued to spearhead education campaigns directed at public and private schools to facilitate a better understanding among youth of religious tolerance and respect for diversity. On July 26, INADI announced a new private-sector partnership, “Business for Diversity,” to counter discrimination and encourage diversity in the workplace, including religious diversity. On July 10, INADI signed a memorandum of cooperation with the Argentine Federation of Maccabean Community Centers to counter discrimination based on religion in sports. INADI continued to work with UNICEF to counter cyberbullying, including religious discrimination.

In April the MFA provided the Delegation of Argentine Jewish Associations (DAIA) with copies of approximately 140,000 World War II Holocaust-era documents for research purposes.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to media reports, a draft bill legalizing abortion during the first 14 weeks of pregnancy generated civic dialogue on issues of separation of church and state. On March 6, 71 legislators presented the draft bill; on August 9, the senate voted 38 to 31 against the abortion legalization bill, which had narrowly passed the chamber of deputies 129 to 125 on June 14. Protesters supporting and opposing the draft bill, including from many religious groups, held massive and largely peaceful overnight demonstrations in front of congress before voting occurred on June 14 and August 9. Protest against the bill came largely from religious groups. On June 7, the CEA cohosted an interreligious prayer service against abortion with Muslim, Jewish, and evangelical Christian leaders. On August 4, ACIERA, the country's largest evangelical association, held a massive march against abortion legalization. On August 8, Catholic Cardinal of Buenos Aires Mario Aurelio Poli held a public pro-life Mass. Catholic media reported on August 18, following the rejection of the abortion draft bill, thousands of individuals renounced their Catholic faith in an organized and public fashion. Catholic media reported these actions exemplified a growing confrontation between Catholic Church authorities and members calling for greater separation between church and state.

Catholic and evangelical Christian churches reported graffiti throughout the country by individuals protesting religious opposition to abortion. On March 9, graffiti in favor of abortion legalization appeared on the Metropolitan Cathedral, police headquarters, and various Catholic schools in Salta Province. On August 9, protesters painted graffiti in favor of abortion legalization on the front gates and walls of the Sacred Family Church in Neuquen Province. On September 13, unidentified individuals painted the walls of the San Justo parochial high school in Buenos Aires Province with anti-Catholic slogans. On August 11, ACIERA denounced defacement of various member churches throughout the country due to the abortion legalization debate.

Media reported a Catholic high school teacher in Buenos Aires was recorded on camera justifying anti-Semitism, stating that Hitler did "good things." School authorities removed the teacher, Denise Yanet Evequoz, from her teaching duties in May after a video recording of her class in 2015 went viral on social media. Evequoz defended her statements and did not apologize.

In May journalist Santiago Cuneo stated during a television show that President Macri was a political partner of international Zionism and that his government had staffed the country's intelligence agency with Israeli intelligence agents. Cuneo also personally insulted a Jewish member of the president's cabinet and a Jewish businessman while the show was on the air. DAIA publicly condemned the journalist's statements and said it would bring discrimination charges against him. Cuneo resigned after the incident but did not retract his statements.

On August 28, media reported unidentified individuals with unknown motives set fire to the San Roque Cathedral in Cordoba, causing property damage. The church dates back to 1760 and is a dedicated national monument. At year's end, there were no reports of detentions of any individuals.

On September 6, two members of congress hosted a public congressional hearing on the separation of church and state. Civil society leaders, legal experts, and politicians provided remarks on religious influence in national institutions and what they stated was the need for equality among religious communities. They cited the nine draft bills in congress seeking to equalize government treatment of religious communities and remove privileges granted to the Catholic Church. On September 15, approximately three dozen individuals protested what they deemed the lack of separation of church and state by publicly renouncing their Catholic faith on the steps of the Metropolitan Cathedral and submitting 5,000 names of other individuals who renounced their Catholic faith to the CEA.

DAIA documented 404 reported complaints of anti-Semitism in 2017, compared with 351 reported complaints in 2016. Eighty-eight percent of reported incidents occurred on social media. DAIA continued to track complaints of verbal, physical, and online harassment or anti-Semitic remarks, as well as anti-Semitic language in public spaces, including social and traditional media and during demonstrations and protests. DAIA did not provide an analysis of the increase in cases.

From March to May in advance of the World Cup, the River Plate Museum, which is located in one of the largest stadiums in Buenos Aires, hosted a Holocaust exhibit entitled "It Wasn't a Game." The museum received approximately 25,000 visitors each month. The exhibit featured stories about soccer during the Holocaust era and highlighted Emerico Hirschl, a Hungarian-Jewish soccer coach who led the River Plate soccer team to national and international championships in the 1930s and convinced port guards to allow Jews to enter through Buenos Aires' ports.

On November 21, the MENORA World Youth Organization and local NGO La Alameda held its first “Soccer Game for Peace” in Buenos Aires. The game brought together Senegalese Muslim immigrants with young Jewish players, creating two mixed interreligious teams to promote fraternity and understanding among the two faith communities.

According to Adalberto Assad, president of the Argentine Confederation of Arab Entities, anti-Muslim sentiment was present in the country, which is home to one of the most active Islamic organizations in Latin America (Islamic Organization of Latin America) as well as the largest mosque in Latin America (King Fahd Islamic Cultural Center). In a November article on the website of recently inaugurated Shia television channel Annur TV, Assad stated that “there is a persecution against the Muslim community in [the country]...What is happening now has never been seen before.” The article went on to discuss an arrest and home search just prior to the G20 Leaders Summit of two Muslim brothers accused of having connections to Hezbollah and an alleged weapons cache.

In Mendoza Province, a Muslim woman was denied entry to the pool of a private swimming club – Cachueta Hot Springs – because she was wearing a burkini. The club permits bathers to enter the water only with bikinis or one-piece swimsuits; an employee monitoring pool entrances refused her entry because the burkini did not fit into either of those categories. The employee stated the woman could use the other facilities of the complex but not enter the water. The woman then went to the employee who had sold her the entrance ticket and received a refund. She later made a formal complaint to INADI detailing what had happened; INADI stated that the woman was correct in her complaint and that the complex had broken the law by denying her entrance into the pool.

Interreligious groups such as Religions for Peace, whose members included Catholic, Protestant, evangelical Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Baha’i, and indigenous religious groups, and the Argentine Council for Religious Freedom, continued to work on increasing opportunities for interreligious action on common societal challenges. On December 6, leaders from the Islamic Center of the Argentine Republic (CIRA), the AMIA, and the CEA signed a document to further interreligious dialogue and peace. The declaration, an updated version of a similar document signed in 2005 by then Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio and his peers in the interreligious community, affirmed the commitment of all involved not to permit religious conflicts from other parts of the world to affect the fraternity among religious communities in the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with government representatives, including the secretary of worship, the MFA's human rights office, and the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights, to discuss ways to promote respect for religious minorities and interfaith cooperation. In meetings with government officials at the national, provincial, and Buenos Aires levels, the Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed tolerance, the country's interfaith movement, and measures to counteract religious discrimination. In meetings with the secretary of worship, embassy officials emphasized the importance of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue and discussed the status of the AMIA case and ways to counter anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment.

Embassy outreach included regular meetings with religious and community leaders, including members of interreligious organizations. In these meetings, embassy officials discussed the status of religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, as well as the conditions and integration of refugees regardless of their religion; the status of the AMIA case; and ways to counter anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment and promote religious tolerance. Embassy officials met with religious groups and NGOs focused on social work and community service, including Catholic, Seventh-day Adventist, and evangelical Christian leaders, and discussed faith-based responses to poverty, drug addiction, domestic violence, homelessness, and malnutrition as well as promoting respect for religious diversity. In August the Ambassador gave keynote remarks on countering online hate speech and discrimination based on religion at a conference in Tucuman Province. The Ambassador also hosted meetings with Jewish community members throughout the year to discuss progress in the AMIA bombing case. In September a Department of State official gave keynote remarks at the G20 Interfaith Forum and met with religious leaders and government officials, including parliamentarians, to discuss religious freedom globally.

Embassy officials regularly attended conferences, observances, and commemorations organized by religious groups and NGOs, including DAIA, AMIA, Latin American Jewish Congress, CEA, CIRA, Islamic Institute for Peace, Evangelical Church of Argentina, and Argentine Council for Religious Freedom. The Ambassador spoke at several of these events, including at a remembrance ceremony at AMIA and a hate crimes conference in Tucuman Province. Embassy officials continued to encourage increased representation and diversity of religious communities in embassy-sponsored scholarship and educational programs.

Embassy officials supported interfaith cooperation and universal respect for freedom of religion through both public statements and social media campaigns.