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2023 Report on International Religious Freedom: Uruguay

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and affirms the state does not endorse any specific religion. Legal statutes prohibit discrimination based on religion.

In April, an Afro-Umbandist group filed a complaint before the National Institution of Human Rights and Ombudsman (INDDHH) against Maldonado Department's government after local inspectors interrupted a religious ritual involving the use of drums in response to noise complaints. Group members reportedly asked to continue the ritual without drums, but inspectors halted the ritual and ordered the group to leave the area. Afro-Umbandists reported similar incidents of officials interrupting rites, including rituals with drums and animal sacrifices, throughout the year. Representatives of the Muslim community reported Muslim women working in some state entities were not allowed to wear hijabs at work. They also reported authorities rarely made halal meals available for Muslim children in public primary schools. Some non-Christian religious groups reiterated their belief that the government favored Christians because it designated Christian holidays as official secular holidays, after renaming them, thereby automatically granting Christians time off from work to observe them. Members of the Jewish and Seventh-day Adventist communities continued to advocate government regulations that would allow alternate university-level examir dates for students observing religious holidays or days of rest. Despite repeated requests,

from religious groups, the government did not include a question on religion in the census conducted during the year. In January, the government marked International Holocaust Remembrance Day with a message in which President Luis Lacalle Pou's Deputy Chief of Staff Rodrigo Ferres stated "Uruguay, in its most worthy tradition, will continue to work constantly both nationally and internationally to prevent such egregious acts of murder and denigration suffered by the Jewish people ... from ever happening again."

Jewish representatives reported increased antisemitic social media commentary, including Holocaust denial and banalization. They said antisemitic social media commentary was particularly common during public events that involved members of the Jewish community, such as during a soccer match between the Uruguayan and Israeli national teams. After the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel, Jewish representatives reported an additional surge in antisemitism. 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 with a wide range of government officials the government's interpretation of secularism, the need for a government counterpart responsible for religious freedom issues, and the importance of tolerance toward religious minorities and interfaith collaboration. Embassy officials met with Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, and other religious group representatives to discuss their views on the government's position toward religion and religious groups. In October, the Ambassador hosted a religious freedom roundtable with representatives of various religious groups to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country and specific incidents and developments during the year.

Section I.

Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the country's total population at 3.4 million (midyear 2023). According to a 2014 Pew Research Center survey, the most recent available, 57 percent of the population self-identifies as Christian (42 percent Catholic and 15 percent Protestant, the latter including the Anglican Church and Valdese Church), 37 percent as religious but unaffiliated, and 6 percent as other. Minority Christian religious groups include Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ), and the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Afro-Umbandists blend elements of Catholicism with African

and Indigenous traditional and ancestral religious beliefs. There are also Buddhists, followers of the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church), Brahma Kumaris, and Bahai's. 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 also calls for an annual commemoration of secularism to be held on March 19.

The constitution accords the Catholic Church the right to own all its churches that were funded wholly or partly by the state except for chapels dedicated for use in 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.

By registering for official recognition and certification with the MEC, religious groups can receive benefits, services, recognition, and tax reductions from the government.

Foreign 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.

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 Honorary Commission against Racism, Xenophobia, and All Other Forms of Discrimination (CHRXD), a body comprising officials of various government ministries and agencies and three nongovernmental organizations appointed by the President and headed by a MEC representative, enforce government compliance with antidiscrimination laws. Both organizations receive complaints of discrimination, conduct investigations, issue separate rulings on whether discrimination occurred, and provide free legal services to plaintiffs. 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 incidents of discrimination.

The National Rehabilitation Institute's protocol regulates religious issues in prisons, including standardizing access to religious counseling and religious meeting spaces. Several prisons in the country have a dedicated space for religious practice.

Public schools do not offer courses on religion, although the law does not prohibit schools from offering such instruction. Public schools close on some Christian holidays. Students belonging to 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.

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."

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

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

Abuses Involving the Ability of Individuals to Engage in Religious Activities Alone or In Community with Others

According to media reports, in April, an Afro-Umbandist group filed a complaint before the INDDHH against the Maldonado Department's government after local inspectors interrupted

an Afro-Umbandist religious ritual involving the use of drums, stating that neighbors had complained of excessive noise. Members of the group asked to continue the ritual without drums and only with clapping, but the inspectors halted the ritual and ordered the group to leave the area. The Afro-Umbandists said the inspectors' actions violated their right to practice religious rituals. A member of the Maldonado local council said local inspectors treated members of the religious groups as criminals. Representatives of the Afro-Umbanda religion stated there were other similar incidents throughout the year where state officials interrupted their rites, including rituals with drums and animal sacrifices.

Representatives of the Muslim community reported Muslim women working in state entities (public schools, military and others) were not allowed to wear hijabs at work, even though wearing hijabs and other religious attire and symbols is not prohibited by law. Members of the community continued to report authorities rarely made appropriate meals available in public primary schools for Muslim children who observed halal restrictions.

Some non-Christian religious groups reiterated they believed the government favored Christians, as evidenced by the government's designating Christian holidays as official secular holidays, after renaming them, thereby automatically granting Christians time off from work to observe them. Representatives of the non-Christian groups said the government did not designate holidays of other religious groups as official, thereby requiring followers to request a day off using their personal leave to observe them and leaving the matter to the discretion of employers.

Members of the Jewish and Seventh-day Adventist communities continued to advocate new government regulations that would allow students observing religious holidays or days of rest to take university-level examination on alternate dates instead of leaving that decision to individual professors. A report from one Seventh-day Adventist noted that even in cases when a university allowed a student to take an examination on an alternate date, the test was oral instead of the usual written one, which, she said, placed Seventh-day Adventist students at a competitive disadvantage. There were also reports of Church members who could not complete their university studies because some required courses were scheduled on Saturdays, without accommodating students on religious grounds.

Other Developments Affecting Religious Freedom

Throughout the year, Afro-Umbandists, Muslim groups, and other religious organizations asked the government to include questions about religion in the 2023 census to generate

better data on religious identity that could be used when designing public policy. The government declined to add the questions to the census, citing the government's official commitment to secularism, which it often interpreted as the absence of religion.

Religious leaders welcomed the National Rehabilitation Institute's protocol standardizing access to religious counseling and religious meeting spaces in prisons and expressed the need to have similar protocols for other institutions, such as juvenile detention centers and mental health facilities.

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.

In January, the government broadcast a national message commemorating the International Holocaust Remembrance Day in which President Lacalle Pou's Deputy Chief of Staff Ferres said the Holocaust "not only demonstrated how far human cruelty can go, but also demonstrated in the most horrific way what happens when societies fail to cultivate tolerance, respect for others, nondiscrimination and fundamental rights." Ferres closed his speech stating, "Uruguay, in its most worthy tradition, will continue to work constantly both nationally and internationally to prevent such egregious acts of murder and denigration suffered by the Jewish people ... from ever happening again." The government also published an information video about the Holocaust on its official website. According to the website, "Holocaust Remembrance Day is celebrated on January 27 and is a day to remember and honor the victims of the Holocaust, the genocide in which more than six million Jews and other groups deemed "undesirable" by the Nazis during World War II died. This day is a call for responsibility and tolerance, and an opportunity to reflect on the importance of preventing future acts of violence and oppression."

On November 9, President Lacalle Pou, senior government officials and politicians, and human rights activists attended the Central Israelite Committee's commemoration of the 1938 Night of Broken Glass (Kristallnacht). Several participating government officials and politicians later posted online about the commemoration, emphasizing the need to remember and reflect and to foster tolerance and coexistence.

In June, the American Jewish Committee presented President Lacalle Pou the Gesher (bridge) Award for building bridges between the United States, Latin America, and Israel. On June 13, in remarks given at the American Jewish Committee's Global Forum, President Lacalle Pou described the close bonds between his country and Israel, stating, "Our country received and

protected (refugees) and they had the opportunity to restart their lives and contribute to the greatness of our nation. Both the Jewish community in Uruguay, so deeply rooted in the life of our country, and the many Uruguayans who live in Israel serve as an invaluable bridge connecting the two countries.”

Section III.

Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

ABUSES INVOLVING THE ABILITY OF INDIVIDUALS TO ENGAGE IN RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES ALONE OR IN COMMUNITY WITH OTHERS

Representatives of the Muslim community reported some individuals insulted women who were wearing a hijab; in one incident, an unidentified person attempted to remove a woman’s hijab while she was walking on the street. There were also reports of some private sector employers not allowing women to wear their hijabs at the workplace. Some banks required women to remove their hijab to enter the building.

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. They stated they believed it was due to a lack of knowledge of their religious practices, rather than discrimination.

ABUSES INVOLVING DISCRIMINATION OR UNEQUAL TREATMENT

After the October 7 Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel, Jewish representatives reported an additional surge in antisemitism, including the painting of swastikas and antisemitic comments on walls throughout Montevideo and over posters of victims kidnapped by Hamas during the attack.

Jewish representatives reported increased antisemitic social media commentary during the year, including instances of Holocaust denial and banalization. They said antisemitic social media commentary was particularly common during public events that involved members of the Jewish community, such as the final match of the Uruguayan basketball league between the Nacional and the Hebraica teams or when the Uruguayan national soccer team played

against the Israeli national team in the semifinals of the U-20 World Cup, the biennial soccer world championship tournament of men's national teams with players under the age of 20.

Section IV.

U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

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

During the year, embassy officials met with religious leaders, including Catholics, Jews, evangelical Protestants, and members of other minority religious groups, as well as with academics, lawyers, and human rights experts to discuss interfaith collaboration and to hear concerns regarding faith-related issues. These meetings included representatives from the Latin American Jewish Congress, the Anglican Church, the Universal Peace Federation, the Church of Jesus Christ, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Egyptian Islamic Cultural Center, the Biblical Society, Brahma Kumaris, and the Baha'i Faith.

On October 18, the Ambassador hosted a religious freedom roundtable with representatives of various religious groups to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country, including specific incidents and developments during the year. The Ambassador delivered remarks emphasizing the U.S. government's commitment to defending and promoting religious freedom, stating, "The United States staunchly defends the right of all people to freely exercise their religion. No one should be attacked for their religious beliefs." The embassy used social media to highlight respect for religious diversity and tolerance and to commemorate International Religious Freedom Day.

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