

ITALY

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The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. 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, as well as episodes of anti-Semitism. Prominent religious and government officials continued to encourage mutual respect for religious differences.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 116,347 square miles and a population of 60.4 million. 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, Bahais, 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 Muslim, from North Africa, South Asia, Albania, and the Middle East. According to an independent research center, in 2008, 1.3 million immigrants were Christian Orthodox--coming mainly from Romania, Ukraine, and Russia--1.25 million were Muslim, 140,000 Protestant, and 100,000 Hindu or Buddhist. These statistics reflect the total numbers of followers of religions estimated in 2008.

There are reportedly more than 700 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. The Jewish community is an estimated 30,000 and maintains synagogues in 21 cities.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

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The government recognizes the Holy See as a sovereign authority. Under the 1984 revision of 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 confessions 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 did not always grant the intesa privileges automatically, and a religious community without an intesa did not benefit financially from the voluntary check-off on taxpayer returns.

The state paid Catholic religion teachers, but this financial support was not available to other religious communities. If a student requested the assistance of a religion teacher of a non-Catholic religious group, that group could select a representative but had 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. In 2007 the government signed draft accords with the Buddhist Union,

Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, the Apostolic Church, the Orthodox Church of the Constantinople Patriarchate, and Hindus, and at the same time amended previous intese with the Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches and the Adventists. On May 13, the council of ministers approved the 2007 new and amended intese and submitted them to parliament for ratification. Parliament did not vote on these intese during the reporting period. Negotiations remained suspended with the Soka Gakkai, a Japanese Buddhist group, pending their reorganization. Divisions among Muslim organizations, as well as the lack of a single leader to represent them at the national level, hindered that community's efforts to seek an intesa.

The law provides all religious groups the right to be recognized as legal entities and be granted fiscal exempt status. Insults against all divinities are considered blasphemy, a crime punishable by a fine. There were no reports regarding enforcement of this law during the period covered by the report.

Denial of the Holocaust is a crime punishable by up to four years in prison.

The 2005 Antiterrorism Decree, which penalized those who attempted to hide their identity, may 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. On January 29, the city of Novara enacted a local ordinance to enforce the 1975 antiterror law, prohibiting individuals from covering their faces in public areas near government facilities.

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.

Missionaries or religious workers must apply for appropriate visas prior to arriving in the country.

The revised concordat of 1984 accords the Catholic Church certain privileges regarding instruction in public schools. For example, the government allowed 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 were optional, and students who did not wish to attend were 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. Problems may arise in small communities where information about other religious groups and the number of non-Catholics was limited. The constitution prohibits state support for private schools; however, the law provides tax breaks for parents with dependents in private schools.

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

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period; however, no Muslim group had been able to build a mosque in the past year.

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

In December 2009, the city of Genoa authorized the building of a mosque on a piece of land provided by local authorities. On January 23, the Northern League organized a referendum for consultation at the city level, and allegedly, 99 percent of the 5,300 voters voted against allowing the new mosque. On April 27, the spokesperson of the local Islamic community resigned after receiving threats from local citizens. Other than a debate among local architects about the design of the proposed mosque and the local imam's appeal for a decision to be made before the end of 2010, nothing substantive had transpired by the end of the reporting period. City of Turin officials approved plans for a mosque that can accommodate up to seven hundred worshippers. Finalized building permits were approved in December and work is expected to commence in January 2011. Consistent with the city's ban on the construction of any tower-like structures, the plans did not include a minaret. Milan, home to an estimated 100,000 Muslims, has several small "cultural centers," but there is no true mosque within the city. The attempts by the Islamic Center of Via Padova, an organization of several thousand Muslims that has tried for several years to build a mosque with a minaret in Milan, continued to be unsuccessful. On October 2, the mayor of Milan stated that no mosque can be built

in Milan in the absence of a national law on mosques or at least security guarantees from the national government.

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. The one with most visibility originated in 2002, when a mother argued that the presence of crucifixes in her children's public school classrooms ran counter to the principle of secularism, and referred to a court of cassation judgment in 2000 that had found the presence of crucifixes in polling stations to be contrary to the principle of secularism of the state. The case continued through all levels of the justice system but lost because crucifixes were not only religious symbols but also considered to be symbols of the country's history, culture, and identity, and considered to represent the democratic principles of equality, liberty, and tolerance. In 2006, the country's highest administrative court dismissed the mother's appeal, arguing that in the country the crucifix represented the secular values of the constitution and of civic life. The mother took the case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which in November 2009 determined that the display of crucifixes in public schools violated the separation of church and state. The ruling condemned the country for violating freedom of religion and the right to education.

On March 2, the ECHR agreed to hear the government's appeal, and on June 30, the ECHR Grand Chamber heard the government's case. On September 25, Foreign Affairs Minister Franco Frattini said that the principle expressed by the ECHR in its ruling, according to which the crucifix is a symbol of division between believers and nonbelievers, is offensive and unacceptable. The Grand Chamber had not announced its decision by the end of the reporting period.

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees, in the country.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On February 10, Interior Minister Maroni established a Committee for Italian Islam made up of 19 Muslim and non-Muslim experts organized into four working groups on imam training, mosques, burqa law, and mixed marriages. They will submit recommendations to the government on new rules that might facilitate religious practices and integration. The committee received criticism for its mainly Italian, non-Muslim constitution. In April one member of the committee, a convert to Islam and member of the board of the mosque of Rome, resigned, stating that "only two out of eight working group rapporteurs are Muslims" and only a few of

the members are "practicing Muslims recognized by their own communities." On July 14, the committee expressed a favorable opinion of a draft law submitted by the Northern League to the Chamber of Deputies in September that bans the burqa and niqab. The committee suggested removing a specific reference to Islam from the text, noting that the two garments are worn by only a few ethnic minorities and are not mandatory under Islamic doctrine. If approved, the law would punish those who force persons to hide their face with one year in prison and a 30,000 euro (\$40,200) fine.

On April 24, the city of Ferrara announced that a new National Museum of Italian Judaism and the Holocaust was scheduled to be completed by the end of 2011.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of 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.

The country's approximately 30,000 Jews maintained synagogues in 21 cities. Anti-Semitic societal prejudices persisted, manifested largely by anti-Semitic graffiti in a number of cities. Small extremist fringe groups were responsible for anti-Semitic acts.

According to the Center of Contemporary Jewish Documentation, in 2010 there were more than 40 anti-Semitic Web sites and social networks.

While there were no specific instances of anti-Muslim sentiment reported, some Muslims in the North said they perceived hostility toward their religion in their interactions with citizens and local government institutions. 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 that hostility toward their religion underlay the difficulties. The efforts of Northern League members of parliament to seek legislation to restrict building additional mosques furthered a hostile attitude toward Muslims. 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 (Lega Nord) as a party "of the people."

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

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The embassy and consulates continued to reach out to second-generation Muslim youth groups, providing several small grants that promoted moderate voices through new media and communication training, and participating annually in exchanges for Muslim community leaders such as the International Visitor Leadership Program. The embassy held a year-long seminar series for Italian students where sessions were dedicated to inter-religious understanding and diversity. Through Muslim community-focused events, such as roundtables and the annual Ramadan iftar reception, the embassy and consulates brought moderate leaders together and promoted religious tolerance.