

# **ITALY 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. There is no state religion; however, due to its sovereign status and historical political authority, the Roman Catholic Church has some privileges not given to other religious groups.

There were occasional reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. embassy monitored religious discrimination and developed programs sharing U.S. best practices in support of religious freedom and tolerance with a range of partners, including civil society groups, law enforcement, and regional and municipal governments.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to a 2011 national statistics institute estimate, the population is 60.63 million. A 2009 report estimates 87 percent of native-born citizens are Roman Catholic, but a 2010 report by the independent research institute Eurispes estimates that only 24 percent regularly participate in Catholic worship services. Religious groups accounting for less than 5 percent of the population include non-Catholic Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Bahais, and Buddhists. Non-Catholic Christian groups include 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 a number of small Protestant groups.

The number of Muslims continues to grow with immigration from North Africa, South Asia, Albania, and the Middle East. Most Muslims live in the northern part of the country. According to the research branch of the Caritas nongovernmental organization (NGO), of an estimated five million resident foreigners, 1.6 million are Muslim, 1.5 million Orthodox, one million Catholic, and 0.2 million Protestant. The Jewish community is estimated to be 30,000.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

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### Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

Under a concordat with the Catholic Church, the state is secular but provides support for religion, which it can extend to non-Catholic religious groups if requested. In such cases, legislation implementing the provisions of an accord between the government and the religious group governs state support. An accord 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. An accord also allows a religious group to receive funds collected by the state through a voluntary check-off on taxpayer returns. The absence of an accord does not affect a religious group's ability to worship freely.

The government does not automatically grant accord privileges. Representatives of a particular faith have the right to submit a request for recognition as a legal religious entity to the Office of the Prime Minister. The government and the group's representatives negotiate a draft agreement. The Council of Ministers must approve it, after which the prime minister signs it and it passes to parliament for final approval. Religious groups without elected official representatives able to engage in dialogue with the government, such as the Muslim community, are unable to begin the accord process.

Non-Catholic groups with an accord include the Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Jews, Baptists, Lutherans, Mormons, the Orthodox Church of the Constantinople Patriarchate, and the Apostolic Church. The government has draft accords with the Buddhist Union, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Hindus. Negotiations remain suspended with the Soka Gakkai, a Japanese Buddhist group.

The law provides all religious groups with tax-exempt status and the right of recognition as legal entities. The Catholic Church has traditionally been exempt from property taxes on commercial buildings attached to parishes and other church properties, but the government announced its intention during the year to end the exemption.

By law, insults against any divinity are considered blasphemy, a crime punishable by a fine ranging from 51 euros (\$68) to 309 euros (\$413), although the law is not enforced.

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Holocaust denial is a crime punishable by up to four years in prison.

A 2005 antiterrorism decree penalizing those who attempt to hide their identity could, if enforced, 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 are no restrictions on wearing the hijab (headscarf) in public. A seldom-cited 1931 law forbids individuals from hiding their identities, and a 1975 antiterrorism law requires persons to show their faces in public for security reasons.

Missionaries and other religious workers must apply for special religious activity visas before arriving in the country.

The government allows the Catholic Church to select teachers, paid by the state, to provide instruction in “hour of religion” courses taught in the public schools. The courses are optional, and students who do not wish to attend can study other subjects or, in certain cases, leave school early with parental consent. Church-selected instructors may be either lay or religious, and the instruction includes material relevant to non-Catholic religious groups. The law provides funding for all private religiously affiliated schools meeting government educational standards.

Government funding is available only for Catholic religion teachers. If a student requests a religion teacher from a non-Catholic religious group, that group must cover the cost of instruction.

The government provides permits and public land for constructing places of worship. Government funding also helps preserve and maintain historic places of worship that shelter much of the country’s artistic and cultural heritage.

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

### Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

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On October 8, the European Commission announced that it opened an investigation of the Catholic Church's exemption from property taxes on commercial buildings, alleging an infraction of European legislation.

On April 23, the president visited the Great Mosque in Rome and expressed the hope that all religious groups would respect each other and live in harmony.

There were reports that some government officials objected to women wearing face-covering garments. The government also received such complaints from members of the public. On June 16, a Turin prosecutor dismissed the complaint of a citizen against a woman who wore a burqa in public, arguing that because her behavior was motivated by a religious belief, her covering in public was legal.

In February, officials in Tortona asked a Polish Muslim woman to resubmit a photo for an identity card application because she was wearing a hijab in the original photo. They requested another picture showing her ears, but she refused and appealed to the national Office to Combat Racial and Ethnic Discrimination. The case was pending at year's end.

Muslims in many locations continued to encounter difficulties acquiring permission to construct mosques. Although local officials usually cited other grounds for refusing building permits, some individuals attributed the delays to anti-Muslim sentiment.

The city of Genoa authorized the building of a mosque in 2009 but at year's end still had not identified a construction site.

On November 11, the deputy mayor of Milan announced that the city would designate public space for an Islamic worship center in 2013. Milan, which was home to an estimated 100,000 Muslims, had several small cultural centers informally known as "garage mosques," but there was no true mosque within the city. On March 6, city authorities confirmed they would work with an existing, unauthorized Islamic prayer center, operating without proper permits for several years, to legalize its location.

Construction of a mosque in Turin, authorized by city authorities and the subject of an unsuccessful challenge by the Northern League, had not begun at year's end, pending receipt of funding pledged by the Moroccan government.

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The presence of Catholic symbols such as crucifixes in courtrooms, schools, and other public buildings continued to draw criticism. On July 7, the L'Aquila Appeals Court acquitted a judge who refused to preside in a courtroom displaying a crucifix. A court had sentenced him in 2008 to a year in prison, and had barred him from holding public office.

The Ministry of Education funded training courses for teachers designed to prevent anti-Semitism in social media.

On July 18, parliament approved accords with the Orthodox Church, the Mormons, and the Apostolic Church.

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

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, but prominent societal and government leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

Anti-Semitic societal prejudice persisted, including anti-Semitic graffiti. Individuals and small extremist fringe groups committed anti-Semitic acts, including verbal assaults and posting hate speech online.

On May 29, the anti-Semitic Web site Holywar posted a picture of the minister of education with the number 666 in his forehead, and described him as a "Nazi Jew" for having ordered a minute of silence for the March 19 killing of three Jewish children in France. On March 20, the same Web site published a list of 163 Jewish university professors who it stated were "close to Israeli intelligence and glad to serve Israel." Postal police shut down the Web site.

On July 26, after having proposed stiffer penalties for anti-Semitism, racism, and hate crimes, the minister for integration was the target of an online attack from neo-Nazi Web site Stormfront, which stated that he was a collaborator of international Judaism who wanted to dilute Italian blood.

On July 18, a dozen attackers physically assaulted two Bengali nationals near a mosque in the suburbs of Rome. According to a Bengali association, the attackers were targeting Muslims who live in the area. Local authorities, however, considered the incident a conflict between local residents over noise issues. The victims sustained minor injuries and did not press charges.

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On November 23, local authorities in Milan found a rotten pig's head in the Palasharp, a facility where Muslims held Friday prayers and other events. Police did not identify the perpetrators. The Milan mayor strongly condemned the incident.

On November 16, police arrested the Stormfront leader and three other activists for having established an association to spread anti-Semitism and hate crimes. Postal police shut down the Web site.

The Office to Combat Racial and Ethnic Discrimination in the Ministry of Equal Opportunity reported that between January and July 14, it had received 1,001 calls concerning alleged discrimination, some of which involved religious belief.

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

U.S. embassy and consulate officials regularly met with the government, civil society, and religious groups on issues concerning religious freedom, including advocating for an accord for the Muslim community. The embassy and consulates continued to reach out to second-generation Muslim youth groups, provided small grants to promote moderate voices through new media and communication training, and sponsored exchanges for Muslim community leaders. The embassy and consulates also worked with provincial and city governments in Milan, Bologna, and Reggio Emilia on religious freedom programs. Through Muslim community-focused events, such as roundtables and an Eid-al-Adha reception, the embassy and consulates brought leaders together to promote religious tolerance.