

# ITALY 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. 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.

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

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 61.5 million (July 2013 estimate). A 2009 report, the last year for which statistics are available, estimates 87 percent of native-born citizens were Roman Catholic. Religious groups accounting for less than 5 percent of the population included non-Catholic Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Bahais, and Buddhists. Non-Catholic Christian groups included 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 smaller Protestant groups. According to the research branch of the Caritas nongovernmental organization (NGO), of an estimated five million resident foreigners, there were 1.6 million Muslims, 1.5 million Orthodox, one million Catholics, and 200,000 Protestants. The Jewish community was estimated to number 30,000, and it included one of the largest proportions of Jews in Europe who traced their identity to before the Ashkenazi-Sephardi divide.

The number of Muslims continued to grow with immigration from Eastern Europe; Sub-Saharan, North, and East Africa; the Middle East; and South Asia, most of whom lived in Italy's north. Moroccans and Albanians made up the two largest groups. Muslims were overwhelmingly Sunni. The Union of Islamic Communities of Italy (UCOII) and the Italian Muslim Confederation were the

## ITALY

largest networks of mosques and places of worship. Italian converts to Islam were estimated to number between 15,000 and 30,000, most of whom were women who had converted for marriage.

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

#### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom.

Under a concordat with the Catholic Church, the state is secular but provides financial support for religious groups, which it can extend to non-Catholic religious groups if they request it. An accord is required between the government and the religious group.

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 then negotiate a draft agreement. The Council of Ministers must approve it, after which the prime minister signs it, and it is submitted to parliament for final approval. Once the parliament approves the implementing legislation, the accord governs the relationship between the government and the religious group, including 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 0.8 percent set-aside on taxpayer returns.

The law also provides religious groups, regardless of whether they have an accord, with tax-exempt status and the right of recognition as legal entities as long as they have completed a registration process similar to that of an NGO. In November 2012, the government introduced property taxes on commercial buildings attached to parishes and other church properties with some exceptions regarding activities of assistance and health care centers.

The absence of an accord does not affect a religious group's ability to worship freely.

## ITALY

A limited agreement between the Italian government and the Islamic Cultural Center (CCI) of the Great Mosque of Rome, the largest mosque in Italy, allows the CCI to receive the support of foreign governments for its activities. The current secretary general of the CCI is a member of the Moroccan Ministry of Religious Affairs.

Non-Catholic groups with an accord include the Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, Seventh-day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Jews, Baptists, Lutherans, Mormons, Orthodox Church of the Constantinople Patriarchate, and the Apostolic Church. In December 2012, the parliament approved accords with the Buddhist Union and with Hindus. The government is continuing to negotiate an accord with the Jehovah's Witnesses, and negotiations remain suspended with the Soka Gakkai, a Japanese Buddhist group.

By law, insults against any divinity are considered blasphemy, a crime punishable by a fine ranging from 51 euros (\$70) to 309 euros (\$426), although the law is not generally enforced.

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

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. A 2005 antiterrorism decree penalizing those who attempt to hide their identity could, if enforced, affect those who choose to wear 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.

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 are either lay or religious, and the instruction includes material relevant to non-Catholic religious groups. 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. Some local

## ITALY

laws provide scholarship funding for students to attend private religiously-affiliated schools meeting government educational standards.

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 is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, formerly the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

### **Government Practices**

Local governments were often reluctant to provide property for Muslim places of worship.

On July 6, civil and religious authorities inaugurated the first official mosque in Turin in a former discotheque. Muslims in other locations continued to encounter difficulties acquiring permission to construct mosques, however. 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 30, Riccardo De Corato, a former vice mayor of Milan and leading member of the municipal council's center-right opposition, called for any construction of officially-sanctioned mosques in Milan be put to a referendum. The city, 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 April 18, Bolzano prosecutors shut down two web sites belonging to the association Holywar, which had posted anti-Semitic material produced in Norway. Prosecutors charged some of the organizers with hate crimes. No further action was taken.

On September 25, prosecutors opened an investigation of an intimidation campaign against the president of Rome's Jewish community, Riccardo Pacifici, reportedly organized by the right-wing group Militia Rome to take revenge for the conviction of activist Mirko Viola. On April 8, a judge sentenced Viola and three other

## ITALY

members of the hate group Stormfront to 30 months to three years in jail for publishing lists of Jews and businesses run by Jews on a neo-Nazi website.

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

In December 2012, the European Commission ruled that the Catholic Church's exemption from property taxes, applied between 2006 and 2011, resulted in illegal state aid but recognized the inability of the Church to reimburse the funding it had received. The Commission deemed the 2012 law on property tax that eliminated fiscal exemption for commercial buildings of a church consistent with European legislation.

### **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.

The Office to Combat Racial and Ethnic Discrimination (UNAR) in the Ministry of Equal Opportunity reported, between January and July 14, it received 1,283 reports of alleged discrimination, some of which involved religious discrimination. UNAR did not have a separate reporting category for religious discrimination. Anti-Semitic societal prejudice persisted, including anti-Semitic graffiti. Individuals and small extremist fringe groups committed anti-Semitic acts, including verbal assaults and posting of hate speech online.

On June 2, authorities in Verona discovered anti-Semitic graffiti and swastikas on the walls of the city synagogue on the day of a Jewish celebration. In July news articles cited Rome's chief rabbi as expressing concern over a series of vandalism incidents in Rome and Verona the preceding week.

There were reports of cases of pressure or threats against women accused of not respecting religious traditions and ethics. On February 1, two Moroccan nationals beat a young Moroccan woman for offending Islam when she refused to wear the hijab. There were also reports some citizens objected to women wearing head-covering garments. In Bresso near Milan, however, a successful candidate for the municipal council, Rassmea Salah, wore the hijab during her May political campaign.

## ITALY

On July 16, Sharif Lorenzini, a Muslim leader, stated a water park in Milan discriminated against a group of Muslim women and children. The owner of the park had agreed to host an association called Halal Consumer for a special event but, once he discovered its members were Muslim, he reportedly added restrictions and increased the total cost to the point the organizers had to cancel the event.

The presence of Catholic symbols such as crucifixes in courtrooms, schools, and other public buildings continued to draw some criticism. In September a teacher in a primary school in Bologna decided to remove a crucifix from a class, provoking reactions by some students and their families.

Anti-Semitic acts and threats recorded by the Observatory of Contemporary Anti-Jewish Prejudice (L'Osservatorio sul pregiudizio antiebraico contemporaneo) increased from 58 to 87 from 2011 to 2012, the last full year for which data was available. The European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency's survey of anti-Semitism, released in November, found 33 percent of 649 Italian respondents (out of a "core Jewish population" of 28,200) had experienced or observed anti-Semitic verbal or physical attacks and 77 percent had not reported these incidents to the police; 68 percent believed anti-Semitism had gotten worse over the past five years; and 20 percent had considered emigrating because of anti-Semitism.

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

Officials from the U.S. embassy and consulates general met regularly with government officials, civil society representatives, and religious groups to encourage respect for religious freedom and to promote dialogue among the various groups. Embassy and consulates general officials also engaged regularly with minority religious communities to monitor their ability to practice freely their religion. Outreach continued to second-generation Muslim youth groups, and the embassy and consulates general provided small grants to promote moderate voices through new media and communication training, and sponsored exchange programs for Muslim community leaders. The embassy and consulates general also worked with provincial and city governments in Milan, Bologna, and Reggio Emilia in the Emilia-Romagna region on religious freedom programs. Through Muslim community-focused events, such as roundtables and a two-week speaking tour with an American Muslim leader throughout northern and central Italy in October, the embassy and consulates general brought leaders together to promote religious tolerance and societal respect for religious freedom.