

BOLIVIA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and the government generally respected religious freedom. The congress adopted new legislation in March to streamline the registration process for religious organizations. While implementing regulations are not yet in place, some religious groups stated that the law could revoke their existing registration and limit their activities.

There were no reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. embassy officials met regularly with leaders of religious groups to discuss church-state relations and religious freedom. Embassy officials also maintained regular contacts with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss issues related to religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.5 million (July 2013 estimate). In the 2001 census, the latest to collect information on religious affiliation, 78 percent identify as Roman Catholic and 16 percent as Protestant or evangelical. Approximately 3 percent belong to smaller Christian groups. There are a very small number of Muslims and Jews. According to a 2010 survey, in the four largest cities the population is 81 percent Catholic and 10 percent Protestant or evangelical.

Many indigenous communities, concentrated in rural areas, practice a mix of Catholic and indigenous traditions.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. According to the constitution, the state respects and provides for “religious liberty and spiritual beliefs, in accordance with its worldview.” The constitution states the government is independent of all religious groups and provides guarantees for

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religious freedom and spiritual rights. The constitution and other laws give educational institutions the right to teach religion and indigenous spiritual belief classes with the aim of encouraging mutual respect among religious communities. While religion classes are optional, curriculum materials must promote religious tolerance. The constitution prohibits religious discrimination in access to educational institutions, and protects the right of access to public sport and recreational activities without regard to religion.

A law passed in March regulates the registration process for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that includes all religious groups. The law is intended to streamline and broaden the registration process and prohibits taxation of religious organizations. The government has not yet adopted implementing regulations.

NGOs, including religious and missionary groups seeking legal recognition, must register with the governor's office of their respective state. Religious and missionary groups seeking legal recognition must also register with the MFA's Office of Religion and Nongovernmental Organizations. The current MFA registry includes 428 registered religious groups, and 80 religious groups are currently in the process of submitting the necessary legal paperwork to be registered. Religious groups must submit an annual report to the Religion and Nongovernmental Organization Office to remain on the registry. Religious groups receiving foreign sources of funding may not register, but may enter into a framework agreement with the government for three years that affords them the same judicial standing as NGOs, including tax-exempt status. Registered religious groups receive tax, customs, and other legal benefits. The government may not deny legal recognition to any organization based on its articles of faith; there is no fee for registration but the complex procedure typically requires legal assistance.

All teachers, including those in private religious schools, must receive their training in government-run academies.

Government Practices

Due to the difficult registration process, some religious groups avoided official registration and operated informally. Some evangelical groups expressed concerns that the newly adopted law on registration could revoke their religious institutions' tax-exempt status and limit their activities. They stated that the new law favored the government's Andean spiritual philosophy over other religious beliefs and they also objected to the government's refusal to include religious organizations in the law's drafting process. These evangelical groups advocated for a specific law that

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would cover religious groups, separate from the registration process for NGOs. The government engaged with those groups to discuss their concerns.

Government officials participated in interfaith meetings and ceremonies, but some religious leaders expressed concern during the year that the government favored certain religious groups by inviting them more frequently to participate in government ceremonies.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials maintained regular contact with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss issues related to religious freedom. Embassy staff also met often with religious leaders to discuss their relations with the state.