

# **BOLIVIA 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution states the government is independent of all religion and provides guarantees for religious freedom and spiritual rights. Some religious organizations, predominantly led by evangelical Christian denominations, expressed concern about registration requirements that they stated could threaten their tax-exempt status and favored particular religious groups. On July 30, the concerned groups submitted a petition to the Constitutional Court to demand a ruling on the constitutionality of the law that prescribes the registration requirements. The court's ruling remained pending at year's end. On October 1, evangelical leaders submitted a similar petition to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The MFA rejected it on October 10, but media reported, on October 15, that both parties were making progress on a revision to the law.

Jewish leaders reported acts of vandalism against Jewish religious sites, which police reportedly did not investigate.

U.S. embassy officials discussed issues related to religious freedom with government officials and met regularly with leaders of religious groups to discuss church-state relations and religious freedom. The Charge d'Affaires hosted an interfaith roundtable in October to engage religious leaders.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 10.6 million (July 2014 estimate). In the 2001 national census, the latest to collect information on religious affiliation, 78 percent identified 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 approximately 500 Jews. According to a 2014 nongovernmental organization (NGO) survey of the four largest cities, the population of the cities identified as 71 percent Catholic, 14 percent Protestant, 7 percent evangelical, 1 percent members of The Church of Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon), and 1 percent Jehovah's Witnesses. Five percent professed no religion.

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

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

#### **Legal Framework**

According to the constitution, the state respects and provides for “religious liberty and spiritual beliefs, in accordance with the worldview [of the individual].” The constitution states the government is independent of all religion and provides guarantees for 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.

The law requires religious groups to register with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ (MFA) Office of Religion and Nongovernmental Organizations as NGOs in order to operate legally. Religious groups must submit an annual report to the office to remain on the registry. Those 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.

According to a registration law enacted in 2013, 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 and several bureaucratic antecedents, such as registering the legal name of the organization, in order to register as a religious organization. Among the other requirements, religious organizations must file a notarized listing of the names, identification numbers, tax certificates, and police files of national leaders, as well as notarized lists of names and identification numbers of their entire membership. The current MFA Office of Religion and Nongovernmental Organization registry includes 429 registered religious groups, and 100 religious groups are currently in the process of submitting the necessary legal paperwork to be registered.

According to a decree signed by President Evo Morales in April which the government stated was designed to facilitate the implementation of the religious registration law, religious organizations must file a notarized listing of the names and identification numbers of their entire membership and provide a schedule of

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their annual activities for “control and follow-up” by the MFA. Religious organizations also had to include procedures for “the admission and exclusion of members, the rights and obligation of members, and an internal disciplinary regimen,” among other provisions.

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

### **Government Practices**

Some evangelical Christian groups expressed concerns that the government could apply the registration law selectively to revoke their religious institutions' tax-exempt status and limit their activities. They stated the law favored the government's Andean spiritual philosophy over other religious beliefs, and they claimed the law violated the constitution's separation of church and state. On July 30, a conglomerate of evangelical groups submitted a petition to the Constitutional Court to demand a ruling on the constitutionality of the registration law. The decision remained pending with the court at year's end. On October 1, the groups drafted a letter to the MFA to ask that the ministry reconsider its application of the law to religious groups. The ministry rejected the basis of the petition on October 10, but media reported, on October 15, that it and the religious groups were making progress on a revision to the law. Evangelical groups also advocated for a new law that would specifically cover religious groups, separate from the registration process for NGOs.

Other religious groups operated informally and avoided official registration due to the difficulty of the registration process. Critics of the registration law, led by predominantly evangelical Christian denominations, characterized the measures in the law and the implementing decree as “an obligation to operate under a model of administration contrary to our own faith doctrines.” The government, including President Morales and members of his cabinet, met 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. Police reportedly did not investigate incidents of vandalism against Jewish religious sites.

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

Jewish community leaders stated that there were anti-Semitic acts throughout the year. On September 13, unknown perpetrators threw a stick of dynamite into the main Jewish cemetery in Cochabamba, damaging some gravesites. Vandals also scrawled anti-Semitic messages on the walls and front door of a synagogue in Cochabamba in July.

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

U.S. embassy officials discussed issues related to religious freedom with government officials. Embassy staff also met often with religious leaders to discuss their relations with the state. On October 15, the Charge d'Affaires hosted an interfaith lunch for religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues.