

## BRAZIL 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

### Executive Summary

The constitution states freedom of conscience and belief is inviolable, and free exercise of religious beliefs is guaranteed. The constitution prohibits federal, state, and local governments from either supporting or hindering any specific religion. In September the Supreme Court ruled in favor of authorizing confessional religious education in public schools. Also in September the minister of human rights commissioned the special secretary for the promotion of racial equality to investigate the increase in acts of violence and destruction against Afro-Brazilian temples known as *terreiros*. In a September meeting with a representative from the Ministry of Human Rights, the representative stated that the ministry was prioritizing the creation of committees for the respect of religious diversity in every state, their purpose being to co-draft a national plan on respect for religious diversity. Numerous government officials received civil society training on religious tolerance; one Rio de Janeiro-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) trained 1,500 public officials and students.

In July the press reported that members of an alleged street vendor mafia in Rio de Janeiro attacked a Syrian refugee in a religiously motivated physical assault. In August and September unknown perpetrators committed acts of arson, vandalism, and destruction of sacred objects against seven *terreiros* in Nova Iguacu on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Eight similar incidents occurred in Sao Paulo in September. The press reported Rio de Janeiro Secretary of Human Rights Atila Alexandre Nunes as stating that many citizens accused evangelical Christian drug traffickers of targeting *terreiros* for attacks. A representative of the NGO Center for Promotion of Religious Freedom (CEPLIR) said many of the individuals involved in attacks on Afro-Brazilian religious sites and adherents self-declared as evangelicals. At the end of the year, the perpetrators of the violence remained unidentified and at large. According to the Ministry of Human Rights' Secretariat of Human Rights (SDH), its hotline received 169 complaints related to cases of religious intolerance between January and June, compared with 377 complaints in the first semester of 2016 and 382 in the second semester of 2016.

Embassy officials met with a Ministry of Human Rights' religious diversity official to discuss the ministry's goals to increase the number of state-level religious diversity committees. Embassy officials met with the president of the Palmares Foundation to discuss its long-term strategy of using education to increase understanding of Afro-Brazilian religion. Embassy officials also met with a

representative from the Observatory of Religious Freedom (OLIR), an NGO tracking legislation, to learn about pending national legislation intended to promote religious freedom. The Consul General in Rio de Janeiro visited one of the oldest Afro-syncretic Candomble *terreiros* in Bahia State to reinforce U.S. support for religious diversity. U.S. officials also met with representatives from the Rio de Janeiro state SDH as well as CEPLIR to discuss their efforts to combat religious intolerance. Additionally, U.S. officials met with the imam and president of the Beneficent Islamic Cultural Center in Foz de Iguacu to discuss the role and integration of the local Islamic community over the past century.

## Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 207.4 million (July 2017 estimate). According to the 2010 census, 64.6 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 22 percent is Protestant. Approximately 60 percent of Protestants belong to Pentecostal churches, 18 percent to “mainstream” Protestant churches, and 22 percent to other Protestant groups. Other Christian groups, each constituting less than 1 percent of the population, include Jehovah’s Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). Atheists, agnostics, those claiming no religion, and those whose religion is unknown comprise approximately 8 percent of the population.

Other religious groups, each constituting less than 1 percent of the population, include Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and African and syncretic religious groups such as Candomble and Umbanda. There are a small number of adherents of indigenous religious beliefs. Some Christians also practice Candomble and Umbanda.

According to the 2010 census, there are approximately 35,200 Muslims, while the Federation of Muslim Associations of Brazil states the number at approximately 1.5 million. Other observers estimate the number of Muslims to be between 400,000 and 500,000. Some observers say the discrepancy in numbers may be because the estimate of 1.5 million may include the Brazilian-Arab population, whom the federation may be assuming are all Muslim, but many of whom are Christian or adhere to other faiths. There are significant numbers of Muslims in Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba, and Foz do Iguazu, as well as in smaller cities in the states of Parana and Rio Grande do Sul.

According to the Jewish Confederation of Brazil, there are approximately 125,000 Jews, 65,000 of whom reside in Sao Paulo State and 25,000 in Rio de Janeiro State. Many other cities have smaller Jewish communities.

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

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states that freedom of conscience and belief is inviolable and that the free exercise of religious beliefs is guaranteed. The constitution prohibits the federal, state, and local governments from either supporting or hindering any specific religion. The law provides penalties of up to five years in prison for crimes of religious intolerance. Courts may fine or imprison for two to five years any individual who displays, distributes, or broadcasts religiously intolerant material; the government did not apply the law during the year. It is illegal to write, edit, publish, or sell literature that promotes religious intolerance.

Religious groups are not required to register to establish places of worship, train clergy, or proselytize, but groups seeking tax-exempt status must register with the Department of Federal Revenue and the local municipality. States and municipalities have different requirements and regulations for obtaining tax-exempt status. Most jurisdictions require groups to document the purpose of their congregation, provide an accounting of finances, and have a fire inspection of any house of worship. Local zoning laws and noise ordinances may limit where a religious group may build houses of worship or hold ceremonies.

Government regulations require public schools to offer religious instruction, but neither the constitution nor legislation defines the parameters. By law, the instruction should be nondenominational, conducted without proselytizing, and with alternative instruction for students who do not want to participate. The law prohibits public subsidies to schools operated by religious organizations.

A constitutional provision provides the right of access to religious services and counsel individuals of all religions in all civil and military establishments. The law states that public and private hospitals as well as civil or military prisons must comply with this provision.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

In September a Supreme Court ruling officially authorized public schools to allow religious leaders to teach a particular religion, in addition to offering general religious education classes already taught in schools. A religious diversity specialist at the Ministry of Human Rights characterized the country's system of religious education in public schools as asymmetrical, with some schools offering no religious education course and other schools inviting Catholic priests to teach the class. Although religious instruction was optional, some public schools considered it mandatory but did not offer alternatives or opt-out options for students. The ruling remained nonbinding until the court issued a formal written statement of the decision. It did not mandate confessional religious education in all public schools but rather only authorized it in schools that chose to provide it.

In May practitioners and defenders of Afro-Brazilian religions delivered a doctrinal opinion and technical note to Supreme Court President Carmen Lucia defending the right to practice animal sacrifice as an element of their religious rituals. The case, brought before the court by the Public Ministry in Rio Grande do Sul State, challenged a ruling by the state court permitting practitioners of Afro-Brazilian religions to sacrifice animals for the purpose of food. The adherents of Afro-Brazilian religions stated that the criticism of and challenges to the practice of animal sacrifice were motivated more by racism than concern for the welfare of the animals. They stated that the practice of animal sacrifice was in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Animal Rights. The case remained pending with the Supreme Court at the end of the year.

In response to the growing number of attacks against practitioners and *terreiros*, the Rio de Janeiro state SDH created a hotline called "Dial to Combat Discrimination" in August. According to the Rio de Janeiro State SDH, the hotline will handle complaints only related to religious intolerance and racism. Between August and November, the hotline received 52 calls. Brasilia, in the Federal District, and Curitiba, in Parana State, maintained police stations to investigate crimes motivated by racial and religious issues. In May Minister of Human Rights Luislinda Valois publicly stated that one of the goals of the ministry was to establish these special police stations in each of the country's 26 states.

A religious diversity specialist at the Ministry of Human Rights cited the creation of committees for the respect of religious diversity in every state as one of the ministry's short-term goals. This was also one of the goals outlined in the country's Program for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, included in the country's Multi-Annual Plan (2016-2019). As of the end of the year, four of

the 26 states – Amazonas, Minas Gerais, Sao Paulo, and Tocantins – as well as the Federal District established such committees. The ministry stated that the committees would work together to draft at the state level a national plan on respect for religious diversity, after which the central government would create a national plan.

Following the attacks on *terreiros* in Nova Iguacu, in November the Rio de Janeiro state government established the Joint Commission of the Baixada Fluminense against Religious Intolerance. The commission composed of religious leaders in the Baixada Fluminense on the outskirts of the city of Rio de Janeiro, representatives of the Rio de Janeiro state government, members of the Rio de Janeiro state Public Defender's Office, and civil police officers.

The municipal Office for the Respect of Religious Diversity in Rio de Janeiro helped organize the Religious Expo, which took place on October 6-8, and brought together the followers of 15 diverse religious groups for workshops and roundtable discussions on religious diversity and featured religious musical and dance performances. The office also assisted in the organization of the Buddhist Vesak Festival, which took place at a Buddhist temple in Grajau in northern Rio de Janeiro State, with approximately 200 persons in attendance.

To commemorate the National Day to Combat Religious Intolerance on January 21, the Palmares Foundation of the Ministry of Culture organized three days of events in the Federal District. The events included a panel discussion on threats to religious diversity and secularism in the country, an interfaith celebration at Brasilia's Shin Buddhist Temple, and the launch of the Ministry of Human Rights' report on religious intolerance in the country covering 2011 to 2015. This report, published in January, included press coverage of religious violence and intolerance reported to national ombudsmen and the analysis of current jurisprudence. Of the 409 articles published on religious violence and intolerance from 2011 to 2015, 53 percent involved victims who practiced African-originated religions.

On October 25, the Federal District commemorated its second annual Day to Combat Religious Intolerance. The District Committee for Religious Diversity, established in 2016, organized the ceremony. Rodrigo Dias, the undersecretary for human rights of the Federal District government, delivered remarks on the importance of the theme of religious diversity and the fight against intolerance due to religious motivation.

On October 20, the Rio de Janeiro state SDH hosted a Forum on Religious Intolerance in Nova Iguacu, a suburb of Rio de Janeiro. The state secretariat stated it held the forum in this city because the state's largest number of registered *terreiros* (253) is located there and there was a spate of vandalism incidents involving seven temples in August and September.

In October Rio de Janeiro Mayor Marcelo Crivella took part in the Festa Rio Judaico, a daylong outdoor festival involving 9,000 participants of diverse religious affiliations and featuring Jewish music, dance, cinema, literature, and food. In July Mayor Crivella laid the cornerstone of the city's Holocaust memorial in Yitzhak Rabin Park. The Israeli ambassador attended the event.

According to the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA), a Jewish congressman was accused by one of his party's colleagues of "Nazi behavior" in July because the lawmaker had recommended criminal charges against the country's president. There were no updates or fallouts from this incident by the end of the year.

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

On September 25, unidentified arsonists burned down a Candomble *terreiro* in Jundiai, Sao Paulo, destroying the roof, walls, musical instruments, and art hanging inside. This incident was one of eight attacks against Afro-Brazilian temples occurring in September in the state of Sao Paulo. In another case, an individual entered a *terreiro* during a meeting of practitioners and stabbed four persons, including one minor. Following the attacks, the organization Collective of Negro Entities (CEN) declared it would begin compiling data on attacks against Afro-Brazilian religion practitioners and *terreiros* in the states of Rio Grande do Sul, Pernambuco, and Sao Paulo to present to the United Nations and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights at the Organization of American States (OAS). In filing complaints with the United Nations and OAS, CEN stated it sought accountability from the government for failing to investigate acts of religious intolerance and prosecute perpetrators.

On July 28, unidentified assailants attacked 33-year-old Syrian refugee Ali Abdelmoatty Ilenavvy in Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro. Video footage of the incident showed one of the assailants armed with a piece of wood and yelling at the victim to get out of the country, stating that the country was "being invaded by suicide bombers who killed children and teenagers." The press reported and some civil society leaders said the attack stemmed in part from preconceived notions about the refugee's religion. Several days later, members of a local evangelical

Christian church organized an anti-Muslim demonstration in Rio de Janeiro. They held signs and sang songs referring to Muslims as “assassins, pedophiles, and terrorists.” There were no reports of arrests related to the incident. In August a Jewish Rio de Janeiro city councilman led an initiative to honor the victim at Rio de Janeiro’s city hall.

Between January and June, SDH’s Dial 100 human rights hotline registered 169 complaints related to cases of religious intolerance. Of these complaints, 39 percent (the largest proportion) was in relation to practitioners of Candomble, Umbanda, and other Afro-Brazilian religions. The number of complaints during the comparable period of 2016 was 377.

In Bahia State, the Nelson Mandela Reference Center to Combat Racism and Religious Tolerance reported 13 cases of religious intolerance in the state throughout the year. The center cited as an example the vandalizing of a *terreiro* in Lauro de Freitas in August with graffiti stating, “The blood of Jesus has power.”

The Rio de Janeiro state SDH reported that seven *terreiros* in Nova Iguacu experienced incidents of arson, vandalism, and destruction of sacred objects inside the *terreiros* in August and September. According to Rio de Janeiro state Secretary of Human Rights Atila Nunes, drug lords identifying themselves as evangelical Christians broke into *terreiros* to destroy religious images. The police continued to investigate the attacks and indicted one person for religious discrimination.

In August a group of individuals vandalized the *Centro Espírito Casa do Mago terreiro* in Rio de Janeiro three times within a two-week period. According to news reports, the assailants set fire to the gate, threw an improvised explosive device at the *terreiro*, and fired gunshots at the *terreiro*. The investigation was in progress at the end of the year. Although the civil police did not identify any suspects, the state secretary of human rights said the incidents were carefully planned and likely the work of an unidentified “religious militia.”

In April a third grade teacher at a private school in Recife decorated his classroom with Nazi flags and wore a swastika armband during a lesson about totalitarian regimes. The school removed a Facebook post praising the teacher after the school received numerous complaints. School representatives said the tone of its Facebook post was inappropriate, but they did not apologize. The school agreed to work with the Jewish Federation of Brazil to educate students and teachers on Judaism, anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust.

In June individuals spray-painted a swastika inside a Star of David at the entrance of Jewish sports club in Rio de Janeiro. Local police investigated the incident, which the police considered a hate crime.

On November 14, the JTA reported that students at the Milecimo de Silva High School in Rio de Janeiro conducted a role play of Nazi-era medical experiments; the simulations included students playing the roles of patients as well as doctors wearing swastika armbands. Photographs posted on Facebook also showed swastikas and a sign saying “Nazi Laboratory” hanging on the walls. The Rio de Janeiro state Department of Education reportedly opened an investigation into the incident.

Civil society organizations continued training on religious tolerance. Between December 2016 and September, the Rio de Janeiro-based CEPLIR trained 1,500 police officers, public school teachers and students, and members of the Brazilian Bar Association on religious freedom.

In September the Brazilian Bar Association created a religious freedom commission. The commission’s stated purpose was to allow lawyers and others to discuss legal matters related to religious freedom.

Citizens throughout the country organized peaceful demonstrations to promote religious diversity. Two such demonstrations occurred on October 22 in Belo Horizonte and Curitiba, the state capitals of Minas Gerais and Parana, respectively.

On September 17, the NGO Commission to Combat Religious Intolerance organized the 10th Annual Walk in Defense of Religious Freedom at Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro. According to the organizers, the event drew approximately 50,000 participants from diverse religious backgrounds, including Muslims, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, spiritualists, and atheists.

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

Embassy officials met with a representative of the Ministry of Human Rights to discuss the ministry’s goals to increase the number of state-level religious diversity committees. U.S. officials also met with representatives from the Rio state SDH to discuss their efforts to combat religious intolerance.

Embassy officials met with a representative from the OLIR to learn about pending national legislation on excused absences from school and the rescheduling of test dates for observance of religious holidays. Embassy officials also met with the president of the Palmares Foundation to discuss its long-term strategy of using education to increase understanding of Afro-Brazilian history, culture, and religion. The Consul General in Sao Paulo met with the president of the Superior Council of Theologians and Islamic Matters to discuss the views of and challenges for the Muslim community. The Consul General in Rio de Janeiro visited *Casa de Oxumare*, one of the oldest Candomble *terreiros* in Salvador, Bahia State, to reinforce U.S. support for religious diversity. Embassy officials also met with the NGO CEPLIR to discuss its efforts to combat religious intolerance. U.S. officials met with the imam and president of the Beneficent Islamic Cultural Center in Foz de Iguacu to discuss the role and integration of the local Islamic community over the past century.