



2015 Report on International Religious Freedom - Italy

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Executive Summary

The constitution protects freedom of religion and the right of religious communities to establish their own institutions. The government generally does not enforce an antiblasphemy law. The constitution specifies relations between the state and the Catholic Church are independent, governed by a concordat granting the Church a number of privileges, benefits, and financial support. Non-Catholic religious groups can request another type of accord that provides most of the same benefits. These and other non-Catholic religious groups must register to receive tax and other benefits. Muslims reported continued difficulties in acquiring permission from local governments to construct mosques. Milan and Salerno approved the construction of a total of three new mosques. The government appealed to the Constitutional Court against a new religious buildings law in Lombardy that could make it more difficult to establish new mosques. The government took action to prosecute and punish individuals for making anti-Semitic statements in public and on the internet.

Anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim sentiment persisted in society. The Ministry of Equal Opportunity reported some 400 incidents of religious or ethnic discrimination in the previous year. The Observatory of Contemporary Anti-Jewish Prejudice recorded 40 acts of anti-Semitism between January and October. The stabbing of a Jew in Milan was widely interpreted as an anti-Semitic attack by Jewish community leaders and the media. Individuals and groups harassed Jewish business owners, made anti-Semitic speeches, wrote anti-Semitic graffiti, and engaged in hate speech online. There were reports of harassment of or discrimination against Muslim women for wearing hijabs. The regional government of Lombardy passed a regulation in December to ban head coverings that conceal a person's identity in public buildings, including regional government offices and hospitals. The measure was widely characterized as targeting Muslims.

Representatives from the U.S. embassy and consulates general met regularly with national and local government officials, civil society groups, and religious leaders to stress the importance of respect for religious freedom and tolerance among different religious groups. At the national level, U.S. officials stressed the importance of religious freedom and equal treatment for all faith groups to officials in the Ministry of Interior and the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. The embassy funded small grants to promote dialogue among Muslim groups.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 61.9 million (July 2015 estimate). According to a 2014 poll by the private Institute for Political, Social, and Economic Studies (EURISPES), 75 percent of citizens identify themselves as Roman Catholic. Religious groups together accounting for less than 5 percent of the population include non-Catholic Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Bahais, and Buddhists. Non-Catholic Christian groups include Eastern 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 nongovernmental organization (NGO) Caritas, of an estimated five million resident foreigners, there are 1.6 million Muslims, 1.5 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, one million Roman Catholics, and 200,000 Protestants. The prime minister's office estimates the Jewish population at approximately 30,000.

According to the Ministry of Interior (MOI) and the national agency for statistics, the Muslim population is composed of native-born citizens, immigrants, and resident foreigners, but most of its growth comes from large numbers of immigrants from Eastern Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, the majority of who live in the north. Moroccan and Albanian immigrants are the two largest groups. Muslims are overwhelmingly Sunni.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states all citizens are equal before the law regardless of religion and are free to profess their beliefs in any form, individually or with others, and to promote them and celebrate rites in public or in private, provided they are not offensive to public morality. According to the constitution, each religious community has the right to establish its own institutions according to its own statutes so long as these do not conflict with the law. The state may not impose special limitations or taxes on the establishment or activities of groups because of their religious nature or aims. The constitution specifies that the state and the Catholic Church are independent of each other; their relations are governed by concordat between the government and the Holy See.

The law considers insults against any divinity to be blasphemy, a crime punishable by a fine ranging from 51 euros (\$55) to 309 euros (\$336).

The constitution allows a legally recognized, non-Catholic religious group to negotiate an accord with the government to govern the relations between them. Representatives of a non-Catholic faith requesting an accord must first submit their request to the Office of the Prime Minister. The government and the group's representatives then negotiate a draft agreement, which the Council of Ministers must approve. The prime minister then signs and submits the agreement 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. 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, the Italian Apostolic Church, the Buddhist Union, and Hindus.

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. Any religious group without an accord may request these benefits from the MOI on a case-by-case basis. 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. Taxpayers may specify to which eligible religious group they would like to direct these funds. The Catholic Church received approximately 82 percent of the total 1.2 billion euro (\$1.3 billion) set aside by the government in 2014, the most recent year for which data were available.

The law provides religious groups with tax-exempt status and the right to recognition as legal entities as long as they have completed a registration process with the MOI. Legal recognition is a prerequisite for any group seeking an accord with the government. A religious group may apply for recognition of its legal status by submitting to a prefect, a local representative of the MOI, a request including the group's statutes, a report on its goals and activities, information on its administrative offices, a three-year budget, certification of its credit status by a bank, and certification of the Italian citizenship or residency of its head. To be approved, a group's statutes must not conflict with law. If approved, the MOI is required to monitor the religious group. The MOI may appoint a commissioner to administer the group if it identifies irregularities in its activities.

In December the regional government of Lombardy passed a law, scheduled to enter into force January 1, 2016, prohibiting the use of head coverings that could conceal the wearer's identity in public buildings, including government offices and hospitals. An existing national law already bars individuals from hiding their identity, on penalty of up to two years' imprisonment, and requires them to show their faces in public and in photos used in identification documents. The existing law has never been used to prohibit the use of Muslim head coverings in public places.

On January 27, the Lombardy regional council approved a law introducing stricter requirements for the construction of religious buildings by unregistered religious groups. The law could make it more difficult to establish new mosques.

The law allows the Catholic Church to select teachers, paid by the state, to provide instruction in "hour of religion" courses taught in 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 lay or religious, and the instruction includes material relevant to non-Catholic religious groups. Government funding is available only for these Catholic Church-approved teachers. If a student requests a religion teacher from a non-Catholic religious group, that group must cover the cost of instruction. Some local laws provide scholarship funding for students to attend private, religiously affiliated schools, usually but not always Catholic, that meet government educational standards.

Hate crimes, including those motivated by religious hatred, are punishable by up to four years in prison. Holocaust denial is not codified specifically as a crime, but courts could potentially interpret it as a hate crime.

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

Government Practices

The government generally did not enforce the law against blasphemy and there was no recorded instance of enforcement during the year.

There was no progress in negotiations for an accord between the government and the Jehovah's Witnesses. The government initiated negotiations for an accord with the Romanian Orthodox Church, and the Episcopal Council. On June 27, the government signed an accord with the Soka Gakkai, a Japanese Buddhist group. By year's end, the accord had not been approved by parliament. Through the end of the year, no Muslim groups had been able to obtain an accord with the government or begun negotiations for one.

There was widespread criticism, including by Minister of Justice Andrea Orlando, of the Lombardy legislation, enacted in December by the Northern League party in control of the regional government, banning face coverings in public buildings.

Muslims continued to encounter difficulties acquiring permission from local governments to construct mosques. As of October there were four officially recognized mosques, one each in Ravenna, Rome, Colle Val D'Elsa, and Milan, but more than 800 unofficial, informal places of worship for Muslims. Local officials cited a lack of zoning plans authorizing the establishment of places of worship on specific sites. In November following the terrorist attacks in Paris, senior government officials said places of worship, including "irregular" mosques, should be brought into accordance with the law. At year's end there were no reports the government had closed or taken other actions with regard to any mosques or other places of worship. On March 13, soon after the Lombardy law restricting unregistered religious groups from building houses of worship was enacted, the prime minister filed an appeal to the Constitutional Court for review. The court had not issued a decision at year's end.

On October 13, the Church of Scientology inaugurated its second-largest temple in the country in Milan. Some Muslims said the fact that a much smaller religious group was able to obtain the permit to transform a building into a place of worship relatively quickly, while local authorities subjected their own requests to long delays, amounted to discrimination.

On September 19, the municipality of Milan assigned three sites for the construction of two mosques and a Protestant church.

On March 13, the municipality of Salerno authorized the construction of a mosque sponsored by the cultural and religious association called Bangladesh.

In a regular, periodic review of the accord system published on November 2, the national Court of Audit noted the lack of checks on the use of funds provided by the government to religious groups and the risk of discrimination against faiths that have not signed an accord with the government.

In January Giorgia Meloni, Member of Parliament and President of the party Brothers of Italy, publicly opposed the decision to build more mosques in Milan, stating the national and local governments needed to establish norms to prevent what she described as extremist groups from opening mosques and calling for a public register of imams.

Local governments often rented out public land at discounted rates to religious groups for constructing places of worship. Government funding also helped preserve and maintain historic places of worship, which were almost all Catholic.

The presence of Catholic symbols such as crucifixes in courtrooms, schools, and other public buildings continued to draw criticism from proponents of greater separation of church and state such as the Union of Atheists and Rational Agnostics. On April 2, the director of a high school in Terni suspended a teacher for a month for removing a crucifix from a classroom. On September 3, a municipal council member in Padua donated 1,500 crucifixes to be displayed in municipal offices and schools. On September 14, a city council member in Florence obtained the removal of a large crucifix displayed in a hall used for council meetings.

On January 20, a Rome court convicted six members of the far-right group Militia to eight to 18 months in jail for promoting religious hatred through anti-Semitic banners, graffiti, and posters.

The Chamber of Deputies passed a draft bill on October 13 that would codify Holocaust denial as an aggravating circumstance in the prosecution of hate crimes. The proposed legislation, which the Senate had yet to consider at year's end, would also apply in case of denial of genocide or crimes against humanity.

In September the municipal museum of Recanati screened a documentary titled *Israel, the Cancer*, produced by a local filmmaker, in a government-run auditorium. News reports said the film

compared Israeli soldiers to Nazis. Recanati residents, Italy's Jewish community, and the Israeli embassy criticized the screening.

The government did not interpret a law requiring individuals to show their faces in public as applying to women who covered their faces for religious reasons. Women freely wore hijabs, *niqabs*, or burkas.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The Office to Combat Racial and Ethnic Discrimination in the Ministry of Equal Opportunity reported that one third of the 1,193 reports received in 2014, the last year for which data were available, involved religious or ethnic discrimination. The Observatory of Contemporary Anti-Jewish Prejudice recorded 55 acts of anti-Semitism between January and December 14. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

On November 12, an unidentified individual violently attacked an Israeli citizen resident in Milan while he was walking home in one of the city's heavily Jewish neighborhoods. The victim, who survived with multiple stab wounds, told reporters that his assailant shouted, "I'll kill you," as he attacked him in front of a kosher grocery store. The attacker escaped and, by year's end, police had not identified him. No motive had been formally established, but the media and the Jewish community widely interpreted the case to have been motivated by anti-Semitic prejudice.

On June 9, police arrested a Bosnian man for attacking his daughter-in-law, who wanted to convert to Christianity. The woman had previously baptized her son. There were also reports of women being criticized or harassed for wearing hijabs. On November 23, for example, press reported a stranger verbally attacked a Moroccan woman wearing a hijab at the train station in Salerno.

On February 25, according to press reports, three unidentified men verbally assaulted and threatened the Jewish owner of a shop in the center of Rome and spat on his floor.

Some Muslim associations reported instances of discrimination in schools as parents urged their children not to interact with Muslim classmates in Venice, Messina, and Civitavecchia. On February 25, press reported that a student in Milan was excluded from selection for an internship because she was wearing a hijab.

Press reported the use of social media to incite discrimination and anti-Semitism increased during the year. Online hate speech was the fastest growing source of anti-Semitism. On July 20, a Rome judge ordered 25 members of the neo-Nazi movement Stormfront to stand trial for alleged anti-Semitic hate speech through online media. On May 26, an unidentified user uploaded a video on YouTube containing comments denigrating the Jewish community and denying the Holocaust.

The Union of Italian Jewish Communities and the Foundation of Jewish Contemporary Documentation of Milan continued to operate an anti-Semitism hotline, "Anti-Semitism Antenna," established in 2014, for victims of, and witnesses to, anti-Semitic incidents.

In November Italian Soccer Federation President Carlo Tavecchio received widespread criticism in the media after stating that it was better to keep Jews "at arm's length."

On December 17, news media reported police in Rome had opened an investigation into the online publication of a list of influential Italian Jews by Radio Islam, an extremist broadcaster based in Sweden.

On November 21, Muslim communities organized demonstrations in Rome and Milan to condemn terrorism, ignorance, and violence. Press reports said between 500 and 1,000 people attended the rally in Rome and 700 people attended in Milan. Organizers also used the event to highlight the need for officially recognized mosques to help combat the potential spread of radicalism.

In June vandals painted anti-Semitic graffiti on a wall in Druento. On October 16, the rector of the University of Teramo condemned anti-Semitic graffiti placed on a university wall during a visit of the Israeli ambassador for the launch of a course on the Holocaust.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Representatives from the U.S. embassy and consulates general met regularly with national and local government officials to encourage respect for religious freedom. These meetings included discussions with the MOI and the presidency of the Council of Ministers on the government's efforts to promote integration of immigrant communities and prevent the spread of violent extremism, as well as the lack of official accords between the state and Muslim groups. At these meetings, the officials stated their government's support for religious freedom. The U.S. embassy and consulates also met with civil society representatives and Catholic, Muslim, and Jewish groups to promote tolerance among various groups and monitor their ability to practice their religion freely. Discussions also focused on social inclusion of immigrants and engagement with governments at the local and national level, particularly concerning groups' abilities to build places of worship.

The embassy met regularly with Jewish leaders to discuss the state of Italy's Jewish community and concerns over anti-Semitic incidents. In November the Special Envoy to Combat and Monitor Anti-Semitism and the Acting Special Envoy to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation spoke at a Vatican-sponsored conference in Rome on interreligious engagement and combating intolerance. The envoys also met with the president of the Jewish community of Rome. In December the Ambassador at Large for Religious Freedom met with the cultural director of the Great Mosque of Rome to discuss challenges facing Muslims, including the lack of an agreement with the government. He also met with Jewish leaders, who reported an increase in online hate speech over the past year. The embassy and consulates general provided small grants to promote interreligious dialogue and moderate voices among Muslim groups.

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