

FINLAND 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Note: This report was updated 8/11/16; see Appendix H: Errata for more information.

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for the right to profess and practice a religion, to express one's convictions, and to decline to be a member of a religious community. The law prohibits breaching the sanctity of religion, including blaspheming against God, defaming or desecrating for the purpose of offending what a religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies. Religious communities must register to receive government funds. A new antidiscrimination law, which includes a ban on religious discrimination, became effective at the start of the year. The law bans certain types of animal slaughter. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health published new guidelines on circumcision that discouraged the practice.

Members of immigrant minority religious communities sometimes encountered societal discrimination. The government's newly-established ombudsman for nondiscrimination handled seven cases involving religious discrimination in the first eight months of the year. Police reported 67 criminal complaints involving religiously-motivated crimes in 2014, the last year for which data were available, a slight decrease from 2013. Muslim religious leaders and Helsinki law enforcement officials continued to meet to try to overcome rifts within the Muslim community, and to build trust between Muslim communities and law enforcement. In April the anti-Semitic publication *Magneettimedia* resumed operations and distributed free print copies of a new issue.

U.S. embassy staff met with officials from the Ministries of Education and Justice and Helsinki police officials to discuss religious instruction in schools and the rights of conscientious objectors. Embassy staff met with religious leaders to discuss the state of religious freedom, including concerns of Jewish and Muslim leaders over a government ban on certain forms of animal slaughter.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.5 million (July 2015 estimate). The government statistics office and the Ministry of Education estimate approximately 74 percent of the population belong to the Evangelical Lutheran

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Church (ELC) and 1 percent to the Orthodox Church. Other religious communities, each accounting for less than 1 percent of the population, include Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jews, and members of the Free Church of Finland. The government statistics agency reported in 2014 that the number of persons with no religious affiliation is 1.3 million (approximately 23.8 percent of the population).

There are approximately 65,000 Muslims, of whom an estimated 80 percent are Sunni and 20 percent Shia. With the exception of Tatars, most Muslim immigrants arrived in recent decades from Somalia and North Africa, Iraq, the Balkans, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. Through October, more than 24,000 refugees arrived in the country, including Sunni Muslims from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia and Shia Muslims from Iraq.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution stipulates freedom of religion and conscience, including the right to profess and practice a religion, to express one's convictions, and to be a member or decline to be a member of a religious community. It states no one is under the obligation to participate in the practice of a religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion. A law criminalizes the "breach of the sanctity of religion," including blasphemy against God, publicly defaming or desecrating for the purpose of offending something a church or religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies.

The law requires religious communities to register to be eligible to apply for government funds. To register, a religious community must have at least 20 members, have as its purpose the public practice of religion, and be guided in its activities by a set of rules. According to the Ministry of Education, there are currently 100 recognized religious communities, most of which have multiple congregations. Persons may belong to more than one religious community. Registration as a nonprofit religious community allows a community to form a legal entity that may employ persons, purchase property, and make legal claims.

All citizens who belong to either the ELC or the Orthodox Church pay a church tax set at 1 to 2 percent of income, varying by congregation, as part of their income

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tax. These taxes are not levied on any other religious groups. Those who do not want to pay the tax must terminate their ELC or Orthodox congregation membership. Membership can be terminated by contacting the official congregation or the local government registration office, which can now be done electronically or in person. Local parishes have fiscal autonomy to decide how to use funding received from taxes levied on their members.

Registered religious communities other than the ELC and the Orthodox Church are also eligible to apply for state funds. The law states registered religious communities that meet the statutory requirements (number of members and other income through donations) may receive an annual subsidy from the government budget in proportion to the religious community's percentage of the population.

The ELC and the Orthodox Church are required to maintain cemeteries and account for the spending of public funds. All religious communities may own and manage property and hire staff, including appointing clergy. The law authorizes the ELC and the Orthodox Church to register births, marriages, and deaths for their members in collaboration with the government's Population Register Center. State registrars do this for other persons.

Parents may determine the religious affiliation of their children under 12 years of age. A child between the ages of 12 and 17 must express in writing his or her desire to change or terminate religious affiliation.

All public schools provide religious teaching in accordance with the religion of the students. Students who do not belong to a religion study ethics. Students 18 or older may choose to study either subject. Schools must provide religious instruction in religions other than the Lutheran faith if there is a minimum of three pupils representing that faith in the municipal region, the religious community in question is registered, and the students' families belong to the religious community. If a student belongs to more than one religious community, the parents decide in which religious education course the student participates.

Religious education focuses on familiarizing students with their own religion, other religions, and general instruction in ethics; it does not include religious worship. Although teachers of religion must have the required state-legislated and regulated training for religious instruction, they are not required to belong to any religious community. The National Board of Education provides a series of textbooks about

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Orthodox and Lutheran Christianity, Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam, as well as a textbook on secular ethics.

The government allows conscientious objectors to choose alternative civilian service instead of compulsory military service; only Jehovah's Witnesses are specifically exempt from performing both military and alternative civilian service. Other conscientious objectors who refuse both military and alternative civilian service may be sentenced to prison terms of up to 173 days, which is equal to one-half of the 347 days of alternative civilian service. Regular military service varies between 165 and 347 days.

A new Nondiscrimination Act, which explicitly prohibits religious discrimination, and a related law establishing a Nondiscrimination Ombudsman responsible for supervising compliance with the act, became effective on January 1.

The law bans certain types of animal slaughter, requiring that animals be stunned prior to slaughter. The law provides allowances for religious slaughter, stating that the animals must be killed and stunned simultaneously.

Government Practices

The antiblasphemy law was the subject of political debate during the year, with the leader of the Greens Party calling for an amendment to remove breach of the sanctity of religion from the list of offenses in the penal code, while the former minister of justice argued successfully that the law should remain unchanged.

Leaders of the Jewish and Muslim communities reiterated concern about a long-standing ban against certain types of animal slaughter. Because the animals could not be slaughtered in a religiously approved manner domestically, members of the communities imported meat at higher prices.

On February 20, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health published guidelines on nonmedical circumcision of males under the age of 18 years stating explicitly the country seeks to discourage the practice, including through continued dialogue with religious communities. The guidelines indicated that immigrants and asylum seekers would be provided information about the procedure, including possible harm resulting from it. The guidelines stated circumcision would not be covered by publicly funded healthcare.

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According to the Ministry of Justice, there were 33 objectors to both military and alternative civilian service from January 1 to September 30, five of whom were imprisoned. The ministry did not indicate how many of these individuals objected to service for religious reasons. Twenty-eight objectors were allowed to serve their sentence at home but were required to wear electronic ankle monitors and follow a daily program approved as part of an individual enforcement plan. According to media and Ministry of Defense reports, the government exempted 100-150 Jehovah's Witnesses from military service.

The government allocated a total of 200,000 euros (\$218,000) among 24 registered religious communities, amounting on average to 3.7 euros (\$4.03) per member. The government granted separate funding for refurbishment projects for premises of registered religious communities.

Public debate continued on whether community services such as counseling, burial services, and maintenance of cemeteries should remain free for nonmembers of the main two Churches.

Muslim religious leaders and Helsinki law enforcement officials continued to meet in an ongoing dialogue to try to overcome rifts within the Muslim community, and to build trust between Muslim communities and law enforcement. Representatives of various religious communities, including the Muslim community, continued to engage in dialogue with government authorities on ways to counter violent extremism (CVE). An interfaith group of religious community leaders, together with representatives of the Ministry of Interior, conducted a joint study visit to the United States to learn more about CVE.

The Finns Party's new immigration policy stated "society and taxpayers do not have the responsibility, voluntarily or otherwise, to give support to migrants' feelings of identity, culture, or religious practices."

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Minority religious communities sometimes encountered discrimination. For example, representatives of Muslim immigrant communities said some Muslim job applicants occasionally faced discrimination in hiring decisions, and other

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workplace discrimination. A nongovernmental organization representative shared the example of a woman of Somali immigrant background who faced harassment from colleagues over her choice to wear a headscarf at work. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

According to a November police report on criminal complaints in which the victim's religious background was a factor, police received 67 criminal complaints involving religiously-motivated hate crimes in 2014, down from 73 in 2013. The majority of these cases involved religious insults, threats, and harassment; there were no criminal complaints associated with workplace discrimination in 2014. Between January and August 2015, the Nondiscrimination Ombudsman handled seven cases involving discrimination on religious grounds.

In April the publication *Magneettimedia*, known for its anti-Semitic content, resumed operations and distributed free print copies of a new issue. *Magneettimedia* had ceased publication in 2013 following court decisions against its former editor-in-chief. On April 18-19, the paper distributed at random 270,000 free copies of the 88-page new edition to recipients in the Oulu and Hame regions. According to other media outlets, *Magneettimedia* had a new publisher, Pohjoinen Perinne (Northern Heritage) Association, a group associated with national socialist views, and a new Editor-in-Chief, Markku Juutinen. Juutinen told state broadcaster YLE that the publication was not anti-Semitic and denied being its editor-in-chief, although he was listed as such on the publication's website. The new publisher denied the paper was anti-Semitic, instead calling it "critical of the Zionist elite" that included "both Christians and Jews," but *Magneettimedia* continued to publish anti-Semitic content. The April issue contained articles on "Israel Major Power of Terrorism and Assassinations," "Why YLE Lied in Its Program about The Holocaust," "Israeli Politician We Are the Wise Men of Zion and Rule America," and "National Socialism Counter-Power of World Politics."

In July some media outlets reported the ELC would support construction of a grand mosque in Helsinki.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Embassy staff met with officials from the Ministries of Education and Justice, as well as Helsinki police officials, to discuss their policies towards religious freedom issues, including religious instruction in schools, the rights of conscientious

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objectors, and restrictions on animal slaughter. Embassy staff also met with various religious leaders, including representatives from the Jewish and Muslim communities, to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country, including concerns by members of both communities about the impact of the ban against certain types of animal slaughter on their religious practices.