

ICELAND 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and practice, as long as it is not prejudicial to good morals or public order. The constitution also protects the right to form religious associations. It names the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) as the state church, to which the government provided financial support and benefits not available to other religious groups. A new agreement between church and state removed ELC clergy and staff from civil service status on January 1, and in June the government passed laws amending the financial structuring and subsidies for the ELC. The government allows other spiritual and humanist groups (“life-stance groups” under the law) to register to receive state subsidies. The government registered two new religious groups during the year.

The National Commissioner of Icelandic Police cited one religiously motivated incident during the year involving property damages, in which a person connected to the Nordic Resistance Movement – a pan-Nordic neo-Nazi group – hung anti-Semitic posters in the downtown Reykjavik area. According to a February Gallup poll, 31 percent of the public expressed trust in the ELC, a result virtually unchanged from 2019 but down from 41 percent in 2009.

U.S. embassy officials met with representatives from the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), Registers Iceland, and the district commissioner office (the local authority responsible for registering religious groups) to discuss the status and rights of religious groups. Embassy officials also maintained contact with representatives of religious groups and life-stance organizations to discuss their perspectives on religious tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and the role of religious groups in education and refugee integration. In November, the embassy launched its Religious Freedom Initiative to work with Icelandic partners to champion and advocate for shared values of religious tolerance and freedom. The Ambassador hosted the Chabad Jewish community for a celebration of the group receiving the country’s first Torah scroll.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 351,000 (midyear 2020 estimate). According to January figures from Statistics Iceland, members of the ELC make up 63 percent of the population; Roman Catholic Church, 4.0 percent; Free Lutheran Church in Reykjavik, 2.7 percent; Free Lutheran Church in Hafnarfjordur, 2.0 percent; other Christian, non-Christian, and “life-stance” groups, 5.0 percent; Asatruarfelagid, 1.3 percent; other or unspecified groups,

14.2 percent; and persons not belonging to any religious group, 7.1 percent. The Association of Muslims in Iceland estimates there are approximately 3,000 resident Muslims, primarily of immigrant origin. The Jewish community reports there are approximately 300 resident Jews.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes the ELC as the national church and stipulates the government shall support and protect it. The constitution states all individuals have the right to form religious associations and practice religion in accordance with their personal beliefs, as long as nothing is “preached or practiced which is prejudicial to good morals or public order.” It stipulates everyone has the right to remain outside religious associations and no one shall be required to pay personal dues to any religious association of which he or she is not a member. The constitution also specifies individuals may not lose their civil or national rights and may not refuse to perform civic duties on religious grounds. The constitution bans only religious teachings or practices harmful to good morals or public order. The law further specifies the right of individuals to choose or change their religion.

The law grants the ELC official legal status, and the government directly funds it from the state budget. Following the 2019 subsidiary agreement, the ELC Bishop, Vice Bishop, and other ELC ministers and general staff no longer have civil service status and are no longer paid directly by the government. The Church pays salaries, benefits, and operating costs out of its own budget, which still comes from an annual government lump-sum payment. The ELC also receives funding from government-levied church taxes, as do other registered religious and life-stance groups.

In June, the government passed additional amendments as a part of the 2019 subsidiary agreement. The amendments abolished three separate funding streams previously provided to the ELC (parish equalization fund, church affairs fund, and district funds) and replaced them with a lump-sum contribution. They also ended government subsidies for funeral services provided by religious and secular groups. Under the new law, religious groups, including the ELC, are responsible for collecting payment for funeral and burial services from the family of the deceased.

The penal code establishes fines of no specified amount and up to two years’ imprisonment for hate speech, including mocking, defaming, denigrating, or threatening a person or group based on religion by comments, pictures, or

symbols or disseminating materials that do so.

Religious groups other than the ELC and life-stance organizations may apply for recognition and registration. Only registered groups are eligible for state funding and entitled to legal recognition of religious ceremonies, such as marriages, that they perform. Groups apply for recognition to a district commissioner's office (at present, designated as the district commissioner of Northeast Iceland), who forwards the application to a four-member panel that by law the Minister of Justice appoints to review applications. The University of Iceland faculty of law nominates the chairman of the panel, and the university's Departments of Social and Human Sciences, Theology and Religious Studies, and History and Philosophy, respectively, nominate the other three members. The district commissioner then approves or rejects the application in accordance with the panel's decision. Applicants may appeal rejections to the MOJ, resubmitting their application to the district commissioner with additional information. The same four-member panel reviews appeals.

To register, a religious group must "practice a creed or religion," and a life-stance organization must operate in accordance with certain ethical values and "deal with ethics or epistemology in a prescribed manner." The law does not define "certain ethical values" or the prescribed manner in which groups must deal with ethics or epistemology. Religious groups and life-stance organizations must also "be well established," "be active and stable," "not have a purpose that violates the law or is prejudicial to good morals or public order," and have "a core group of members who participate in its operations, support the values of the organization in compliance with the teachings it was founded on, and pay church taxes in accordance with the law on church taxes." The law does not define "well established" or "active and stable."

According to the district commissioner's office of Northeast Iceland, which covers the administration of religion on a national level, any unregistered religious group or organization may work in the same way as any company or association, provided it has, as the other organizations do, a social security number. Unregistered religious groups may, for example, open bank accounts and own real estate. Members are free to worship and practice their beliefs without restriction as long as their activities do not cause a public disturbance, incite discrimination, or otherwise conflict with the law.

The law specifies the leader of a registered religious group or a life-stance organization must be at least 25 years of age and fulfill the general requirements for holding a public position. These include being physically and mentally healthy and financially independent, not having been sentenced for a criminal

offense as a civil servant, and possessing the general and specialized education legally required for the position. Unlike the requirements for most public positions, a religious or life-stance group leader need not be a citizen but must have legal domicile in the country. All registered religious groups and life-stance organizations must submit an annual report to a district commissioner's office (currently the district commissioner's office of Northeast Iceland) describing the group's operations during the previous year. Registered religious groups and life-stance organizations are required to perform state-sanctioned functions, such as marriages and the official naming of children, and preside over other ceremonies, such as funerals.

The law provides state subsidies to registered religious groups and life-stance organizations. For each individual 16 years of age or older who belongs to any of the officially registered and recognized religious groups or life-stance organizations, the government allocates an annual payment out of income taxes, called the "church tax," to the individual's respective, registered organization. The per capita payment amount varies every year according to the annual budget bill. The government allocates the payment regardless of whether the individual pays any income tax. The government registrar's office ("Registers Iceland"), which describes itself on its website as the government office that maintains records of basic information on everyone who is or has been domiciled in the country as well as citizens residing abroad, maintains a tally of the number of members of each registered group, records the religious affiliation or nonaffiliation of each citizen at birth, and adjusts the information if individuals report a change.

Persons who are not members of a registered organization are still required to pay the church tax, but the government retains their contributions as general revenue rather than allocating them to religious or life-stance organizations.

By law, a child's affiliation or nonaffiliation with a registered religious or life-stance group is determined as follows: (1) if the parents are married or in registered cohabitation and both belong to either the same registered organization or no organization, then the child's affiliation shall be the same as its parents; (2) if the parents are married or in registered cohabitation, but have different affiliations or if one parent is nonaffiliated, then the parents shall make a joint decision on which organization, if any, the child should be affiliated, and until the parents make this decision, the child shall remain nonaffiliated; (3) if the parents are not married or in registered cohabitation when the child is born, the child shall be affiliated with the same registered organization, if any, as the parent who has custody over the child. Change in affiliation of children younger than 16 requires the consent of both parents if both have custody; if only one parent has custody, the consent of the noncustodial parent is not

required. The law requires parents to consult their children regarding any changes in the child's affiliation between the ages of 12 and 16. After turning 16, children may choose affiliation on their own.

By law, schools must operate in such a manner as to prevent discrimination on the basis of religion. Grades one through 10 (ages six to 15) in public and private schools must provide instruction, by regular teaching staff, in social studies, which includes Christianity, ethics, and theology as well as some content on other world religions. The law specifies the curriculum for these classes must adopt a multicultural approach to religious education, encompassing a variety of beliefs. The law also mandates that "the Christian heritage of Icelandic culture, equality, responsibility, concern, tolerance, and respect for human value" shape general teaching practices.

Parents wishing to exempt pupils from compulsory instruction in Christianity, ethics, and theology must submit a written application to the school principal. The principal may request additional information. The principal then registers the application as a "special case" and writes an official response to the parents, accepting or denying the request. School authorities are not required to offer other religious or secular instruction in place of these classes.

Of the 12 largest municipalities in the country, eight have adopted guidelines or rules governing the interaction between public schools and religious and life-stance groups. The Reykjavik City Council prohibits religious and life-stance groups from conducting any activities, including the distribution of proselytizing material, in municipal preschools and compulsory schools (grades one through 10) during school hours or during afterschool programs. Reykjavik school administrators, however, may invite the representatives of religious and life-stance groups to visit the compulsory classes on Christianity, ethics, and theology, and on life skills. These visits must be under the guidance of a teacher and in accordance with the curriculum. Any student visits to the gathering places of religious and life-stance groups during school hours must be under the guidance of a teacher as part of a class on religion and life-stance views. During such classes or visits, students may only observe rituals, not participate in them. The municipality of Hafnarfjordur has similar rules governing the interaction between schools and religious or life-stance organizations. The municipalities of Kopavogur, Gardabaer, Mosfellsbaer, Arborg, Fjardarbyggd, and Seltjarnarnes have either adopted or adapted guidelines on these interactions that the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture has set. The ministry's guidelines are broadly similar to those of Reykjavik and Hafnarfjordur.

Private schools must follow the same curriculum as public schools, including

the Christianity, ethics, and theology curriculum taught in social studies classes. Private schools are free, however, to offer additional classes not in the public-school curriculum, including classes in specific religious faiths.

The law prohibits all forms of discrimination in all fields of society, including those based on religious beliefs. The Equality Complaints Committee reviews complaints and issues fines in cases of violations unless other applicable statutes specify more severe penalties.

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

Government Practices

The atheist organization Sidmennt criticized the 2019 subsidiary agreement legislation and the June amendments regarding funding for the ELC for several reasons. The organization stated that the process lacked public consultation and that the law and the agreement were anachronistic, since they ensured continued funding to the ELC despite decreasing membership numbers and increasing public support for separation of church and state. The organization said that the government should cease direct subsidies to all religious groups for funeral services. Sidmennt stated the ELC's stronger financial standing allowed it hypothetically to waive fees where smaller organizations could not, leading to inequity.

The government church tax payment to registered religious and life-stance groups was 11,700 kronur (\$92) for each member, age 16 or older. According to the government budget bill introduced in October, the church tax in 2021 will be 11,760 kronur (\$93) per member.

According to the official state budget bill, in 2019, the latest year for which data were available, the government allocated approximately 7.3 billion kronur (\$57.43 million) to religious affairs, of which 4.8 billion kronur (\$37.76 million) was in direct subsidies to the ELC and an additional 2 billion kronur (\$15.73 million) was in church tax. The other 50 recognized religious and life-stance groups received a total of 468 million kronur (\$3.68 million) in church tax.

The government approved the registration of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and Lakuish Yoga during the year, bringing the number of registered groups to 52. The district commissioner of Northeast Iceland said the government was reviewing the application of Chabad Jewish Center of Iceland and expected to approve the application in early 2021. The Chabad Center's rabbi stated its

application process, which started in 2019, was still underway but had experienced delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Officials from the Interfaith Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation had previously noted some issues in the dealings between registered religious organizations and the government registrar's office. In 2019, the registrar had restricted religious organizations' access to membership lists, citing the implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation as the reason, but later overturned that decision. Officials from the government registrar's office confirmed that religious groups would have access to the government's membership tallies upon filing appropriate forms and paying required processing fees. Some religious groups complained about having to pay the fee and that individual member registrations were only electronic. Officials from Registers Iceland confirmed, however, that paper applications are accepted and processed.

The ELC continued to operate all cemeteries, and all religious and life-stance groups had equal access to them. Gufunes Cemetery had a special area designated for burials of Muslims and persons of other faiths.

The ELC and the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the public University of Iceland continued to train theology students for positions within the ELC.

State radio continued to broadcast Lutheran worship services every Sunday morning as well as a Lutheran daily morning devotion. According to the station's chief of programming, other religious groups could also broadcast their religious services, but none had sought to do so.

The government continued to require persons applying for a passport to present proof of religion from a religious organization if they wished to receive a religious exemption allowing them to wear a head covering for their passport photographs.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

The National Commissioner of Icelandic Police cited one religiously motivated incident during the year against the Jewish community. In September, press reported that on Yom Kippur, a person linked to the Nordic Resistance Movement, a pan-Nordic neo-Nazi group, hung anti-Semitic posters in downtown Reykjavik. According to the Jewish community's rabbi, a member of the community filed a police report but had not received any updates regarding the investigation. Social media posts suggested the same neo-Nazi

group hung racist posters in Reykjavik in October.

All religious groups reported generally good relations with the government and society at large. Some religious leaders expressed frustration with increased secularism and low levels of religiosity in society.

A Gallup Iceland poll conducted in February and released on February 26 found 31 percent of the public expressed trust in the ELC, compared with 34 percent in 2019, 33 percent in 2018, 41 percent in 2009, and 61 percent in 1999.

The Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation, whose membership consisted of registered religious and life-stance groups – including the ELC as well as other Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist groups – met three times. The COVID-19 pandemic severely affected the forum, and public health concerns prevented meetings for most of the year. Although the interfaith forum allowed unregistered groups to apply to join it, none had done so.

The Islamic Foundation of Iceland organized community information and integration programs for Muslim migrants with representatives from local government and legal offices on such issues as voting and women's rights. The foundation also provided translation assistance to asylum seekers.

The Ahmadiyya Muslim community planned to hold its annual peace conference on promoting religious freedom and tolerance but postponed the meeting due to COVID-19 considerations.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the MOJ, the government's registrar's office, and the district commissioner's office of Northeast Iceland to discuss the roles of religious equality and religious tolerance in the country. Specific topics included the status and rights of religious groups, religious group relations with government and interfaith relations, and the impact of the subsidiary agreement between the ELC and the government.

Embassy officials continued to meet with representatives of the ELC, the Islamic Foundation of Iceland, the Chabad Jewish Community, the Pagan Society, the Baha'i Center, the Ahmadiyya Muslim community, and life-stance organizations such as the atheist group Sidmennt to discuss such issues as their relations with the government, religious tolerance, the extent of their involvement in interfaith dialogue, and the role of religious groups in education and refugee resettlement.

In February, the Ambassador hosted members of the Jewish community to celebrate the arrival of the country's first Torah scroll. Speaking at the event, the Ambassador stressed the unwavering commitment of the United States to promoting religious freedom around the world.

In November, the embassy renewed its efforts to work with local partners to promote and advocate for shared values of religious tolerance and freedom. Through an action plan based on three pillars, the embassy committed to meet regularly with a diverse group of religious leaders, leverage social media to amplify antiextremist and protolerance perspectives, and promote diplomatic advocacy with all levels of the country's government authorities as well as with civil society to promote religious freedom worldwide.