

FINLAND 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination “without an acceptable reason” and provides for the right to profess and practice a religion and to decline to be a member of a religious community. The law prohibits breaching the sanctity of religion, which includes blasphemy, offending that which a religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies. Religious communities must register to receive government funds. In September an appeals court upheld a 2017 lower court ban of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), the largest neo-Nazi group in the country. After a court ruled that a long-standing military service exemption which applied only to Jehovah’s Witnesses violated the nondiscrimination clauses of the constitution, parliament began debating a bill to end the exemption. Some politicians again made negative remarks against Muslims in social media. The ombudsman for children in the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) advocated banning circumcision and stricter religious registration criteria.

The nondiscrimination ombudsman’s office received 55 complaints of religious discrimination during the year, compared with 46 in the previous year. Police reported 235 hate crimes involving members of religious groups in 2017, 10 of which it determined were specifically motivated by the victim’s religion. After its banning, the NRM continued to publish anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim language online, as did other groups. Muslim groups continued to seek adequate houses of worship to match their growing population after plans for a “Grand Mosque” in Helsinki failed to materialize. Groups promoting interreligious dialogue expanded their capabilities during the year, with government support.

U.S. embassy staff met with various ministry officials to discuss government support for religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, religious education, and male circumcision. Embassy staff also discussed with the Jewish and Muslim communities their concerns about the law banning certain forms of animal slaughter, government guidelines discouraging male circumcision, and a rise in religiously motivated harassment. They also discussed the state of religious freedom with these communities, other religious minorities, youth groups, and interfaith networks.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.5 million (July 2018 estimate). The government statistics office estimates that, as of December 2017, approximately 71 percent of the population belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELC) and 1.1 percent to the Finnish Orthodox Church, while 0.3 percent identifies as Muslim, and 26.3 percent does not identify as belonging to any religious group. Census results combine the other minority religious communities, including Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Jews, and the Free Church of Finland, which together account for 1.3 percent of the population.

According to a survey from the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), the Muslim population was approximately 65,000 in 2016; Muslim religious leaders estimate the number rose to 100,000 in 2018, of which approximately 80 percent are Sunni and 20 percent Shia. With the exception of Tatars, most Muslims are immigrants or descendants of immigrants who arrived in recent decades from Somalia and North Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. The Muslim population has been growing rapidly in recent years because of a significant inflow of immigrants.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution bars discrimination based on religion “without an acceptable reason.” It 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. The law criminalizes the “breach of the sanctity of religion,” which includes blaspheming against God, publicly defaming or desecrating to offend something a religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies. Violators are subject to fines or imprisonment for up to six months. Authorities have rarely applied the law, most recently in 2009.

The law explicitly prohibits religious discrimination and prescribes a nondiscrimination ombudsman responsible for supervising compliance with the law and investigating individual cases of discrimination and having the power to levy fines on violators. The ombudsman advocates on behalf of victims, offers counseling and promotes conciliation, and lobbies for legislation, among other

duties and authorities. Individuals alleging discrimination may alternatively pursue legal action through the National Non-Discrimination and Equality Tribunal or through the district court system. Litigants may appeal the decisions of the tribunal and the district court system to the higher Administrative Court.

In May parliament unanimously approved a reform of the Church Act, which governs the practices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Among other changes, the new act, scheduled to come into force in 2019, devolves certain responsibilities back to the Church that previously required parliamentary approval, such as allowing Church authorities to present new policy proposals and hold votes online rather than requiring in person meetings.

Individuals and groups may exist, associate, and practice their religion without registering with the government. To be eligible to apply for government funds, however, religious groups must register with the Patent and Registration Office as a religious community. To register as a community, a group must have at least 20 members, have as its purpose the public practice of religion, and have a set of rules to guide its activities. A registered religious community is a legal entity that may employ persons, purchase property, and make legal claims. Nonprofit associations, including registered and unregistered religious groups, are generally exempt from taxes. According to the MEC, there are approximately 130 registered religious communities, most of which have multiple congregations. Persons may belong to more than one religious community.

All citizens who belong to either the ELC or Orthodox Church pay a church tax, collected together with their income tax payments. Congregations collectively decide the church tax amount, now set at between 1 to 2 percent of member income. Those who do not want to pay the tax must terminate their ELC or Orthodox congregation membership. Members may terminate their membership by contacting the official congregation or the local government registration office, either 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 Orthodox Church are also eligible to apply for state funds. The law states registered religious communities that meet the statutory requirements (a minimum of 20 members and the ability to collect fees) may receive an annual subsidy from the government budget in proportion to the religious community's percentage of the population.

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

Parents may determine their child's religious affiliation if the child is younger than 12 years of age. The parents of a child between the ages of 12 and 17 must pursue specific administrative procedures with their religious community and the local population registration officials to change or terminate religious affiliation.

All public schools provide religious teaching in accordance with students' religion. All students must take courses either in ethics or in religious studies, with the choice left up to the student. 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. Students who do not belong to a religious group or belong to a religious group for which special instruction is not available may study ethics. Students age 18 or older may choose to study either the religious courses pertaining to their religion or ethics. If a student belongs to more than one religious community, the parents decide in which religious education course the student participates. The government does not prohibit or restrict private religiously based schools.

Religious education focuses on familiarizing students with their own religion, other religions, and general instruction in ethics. Teachers of religion must have the required state-mandated training for religious instruction. The state appoints them, and they are not required to belong to any religious community. The National Board of Education provides a series of textbooks about 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. In February the Helsinki Court of Appeals overturned a long-standing exemption for Jehovah's Witnesses from military service. After a conscientious objector who was not a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses challenged the exemption policy, the court ruled in his favor, stating the legal exemption gave preferential treatment to one particular religion

and thus violated the nondiscrimination clauses of the constitution. Per current legislation, conscientious objectors who refuse both military and alternative civilian service may be sentenced to prison terms of up to 173 days, one-half of the 347 days of alternative civilian service. Following the court ruling, all conscientious objectors are entitled to the same exemption from duty regardless of their religion. Regular military service ranges between 165 and 347 days.

The law bans certain types of animal slaughter, requiring that animals be stunned prior to slaughter or be killed and stunned simultaneously in cases of religious practice.

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

Government Practices

On September 28, the Court of Appeals in Turku upheld a 2017 Pirkanmaa District Court ban on the NRM, its regional chapters, and the NRM-linked Nordic Tradition group, which had distributed anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic material and spoken out against what the group called “the criminal capitalist world order and Zionism.” The NRM criticized the decision and stated the prohibition would lead to greater popular support, citing an October announcement of solidarity from the Soldiers of Odin, an anti-immigrant group.

The Helsinki police reduced by half the staffing for a police unit dedicated to addressing hate crimes and crimes involving infringements on the rights of individuals to practice their religion. The unit, established in 2017, had precipitated a large rise in investigations of incitement to violence, some of which involved violations of religious freedom. Police spokesmen described the reduction in force as a reallocation of resources, as parliament had declined to renew the 1.26 million euro (\$1.44 million) grant for the unit, requiring it to draw funding from the general police budget.

On January 14, then speaker of parliament Maria Lohela spoke at an event at the Helsinki Synagogue and pledged the government’s support to defend all Jews in the country.

The ombudsman for children at the MOJ continued to advocate a change to the registration process for religious organizations, whereby a board of experts assesses groups for their compliance with certain criteria prior to issuing a formal registration. In a February media interview, the ombudsman criticized the child-

rearing practices of Jehovah's Witnesses, in particular what he said were reports of the shunning of minors who renounced the Church and the reliance by Jehovah's Witnesses on their own internal investigations rather than on the police in cases of alleged abuse against children. He stated the government should amend the law to include regular review of religious organizations to ensure the protection of fundamental human rights, in particular the best interests of children. According to the ombudsman, a religion deemed noncompliant could be compelled to redress its treatment of children or face revocation of its registration. Jehovah's Witnesses representatives in the country criticized the statements as a threat against their religion.

Press reports described the reform of the Church Act governing the practices of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a move toward greater autonomy for the Church administration and greater transparency in internal decision making. Minister of Education and Science Sanni Grahn-Lassonen told a meeting of the Church synod that "the easing of regulations will improve the flexibility of administration and church autonomy," comments that official church press statements echoed shortly thereafter.

Parliament debated an animal welfare bill, scheduled for a vote in 2019, that would require prior stunning of animals before slaughter in all cases, eliminating the existing exemption allowing simultaneous stunning and killing in cases of religious slaughter. Jewish and Muslim leaders criticized the proposed amendment, saying it would ban all kosher and halal slaughter. These leaders also criticized the restrictions in the existing law, which hindered their communities' ability to slaughter animals in a religiously approved manner and forced them to import meat at higher prices.

Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (MSAH) guidelines discouraged circumcision of males and continued to withhold public health-care funding for such procedures. In its guidelines, the ministry stated that only licensed physicians should perform nonmedical circumcision of boys, a child's guardians should be informed of the risks and irreversibility of the procedure, and it should not be carried out on boys old enough to understand the procedure without their consent. Religious communities, including members of Muslim and Jewish communities, expressed disagreement with the guidelines; however, the ministry stated it had not received any protest during the year from religious representatives regarding the recommendation that only a licensed physician perform circumcision.

In April the ombudsman for children at the MOJ sent a public request to the MSAH that it establish legally binding regulations for nonmedical circumcision and ensure it is performed on minors only with informed consent or prohibited entirely. The request stated the ombudsman would prefer to prohibit all nonmedical circumcision of minors. There were reports the government continued to discuss the possibility of criminalizing male circumcision. By year's end neither the Jewish nor the Muslim community had made an official response to the ombudsman's proposal.

In July the Ministry of Defense published a report advocating a repeal of the conscription exemption for Jehovah's Witnesses, citing changes since the government first instituted the exemption in 1987 that allowed men to complete their conscription duties as an employee in the civil service. The representative body for Jehovah's Witnesses in the country stated the alternative civil service could be an adequate substitute, although the organization did not take an official stand on participation in military service, leaving the decision to the approximately 100 male Jehovah's witnesses who reached conscription age each year. On September 20, parliament accepted a bill for debate that would terminate the legal exemption for Jehovah's Witnesses. The bill was under debate at year's end.

In February police raided a mosque located in a Helsinki shopping mall. While a police spokesperson described the raid as a response to general complaints of criminal activity in the building, Muslim community representatives said it exacerbated already tense relations between Muslims and the police and showed ignorance on the part of the authorities.

Responding to media reports that school districts had been unable to provide sufficient faculty to provide instruction in all of the faiths to which their students belonged, the minister of education stated in August that her ministry would continue to adhere to the established religious education policy and not offer combined religious courses. According to the minister, "The current model, which protects the teaching of individual religion, the knowledge of religion, and the ability to understand different religions, has proved its value in Finnish society."

Following news reports in 2017 that large numbers of Muslim asylum seekers had converted to Christianity during their time in the country and would face persecution should the government reject their application and remove them to their country of origin, the Ministry of Interior (MOI) sought out training from the Finnish Ecumenical Council and representatives from other faiths. With ministry

sponsorship, the council conducted training in late 2017 and 2018 for more than 200 asylum review officers on how to assess converts during asylum adjudication.

NGOs working with migrants continued to advocate for improved interpreting services for asylum seekers, many of whom belonged to religious minorities. They also raised concerns about the ability of religious minorities housed in migrant reception centers to worship without persecution by other migrants held within the same center.

While the government did not release detailed reports on asylum applicants categorized by religion, it stated the number of Jehovah's Witnesses from Russia applying for asylum because of what they said was religious persecution there had increased. In addition, media reports stated more than 200 Russian Jehovah's Witnesses applied for asylum from January to August, compared with approximately 100 who did so in all of 2017. According to the same reports, immigration courts had approved only a small number of asylum applicants, and immigration officials were careful to state that membership in the church would not in and of itself guarantee asylum.

In May the Office of the Prime Minister announced that it would fund an independent investigation into allegations Finnish volunteers in the Nazi Waffen-SS killed Jews and other civilians during World War II. The announcement followed a January letter from the Simon Wiesenthal Center to President Sauli Niinistö requesting the government study the participation of Finnish troops in Nazi killings, particularly in Ukraine.

In July Jussi Halla-aho, Chair of the Finns Party and Member of the European Parliament, criticized the decision by the country's flagship school of higher learning, Helsinki University, to offer for the first time a course in Islamic theology. In a public statement online, Halla-aho stated the goal of the course in theology "is to help us Finns better understand the Islamic minority which has been forcibly created here and of course prevent them from radicalization."

The government again allocated 114 million euros (\$130.73 million) to the ELC and 2.5 million euros (\$2.87 million) to the Orthodox Church. The MEC allotted a total of 524,000 euros (\$601,000) to all other registered religious organizations. All of the allocations were unchanged from 2017.

The MEC awarded a total of 80,000 euros (\$91,700) to promote interfaith dialogue, the same amount as in 2017. Two organizations split the funding: the

National Forum for Cooperation of Religions in Finland and Fokus, an interfaith and intercultural organization.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In 2017, the latest period for which data were available, police reported 235 hate crimes involving members of religious groups, including crimes involving assault, threats and harassment, discrimination, and vandalism, compared with 149 such incidents in the previous year. There were 153 incidents involving Muslims, 45 involving Christians, nine involving Jews, two involving Jehovah's Witnesses, and 26 involving other or unknown religious groups. Police, however, could only ascertain that 10 of these crimes were specifically motivated by the religion of the victims. They could not determine how many of the other incidents were at least in part religiously motivated. The nondiscrimination ombudsman's office reported receiving 55 complaints of religious discrimination in the same year, compared with 46 complaints in 2016. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Despite its banning, the NRM continued to operate a website and make statements promoting discrimination or violence against Jews and Muslims and maintained an active online presence through its website and social media. The second priority of its political platform read, "With all means possible work towards reconquering power from the global Zionist elite." The NRM continued to post anti-Semitic graffiti in public spaces and printed other materials glorifying Adolf Hitler.

Kansallismielisten Liittouma (Nationalist Alliance), established in 2017, mobilized hundreds of demonstrators to an August rally in Turku commemorating the one-year anniversary of a terrorist attack by a Moroccan migrant to whom authorities had denied asylum. The alliance described itself as a network for associated far-right groups in the country and contained members of established groups such as NRM, Soldiers of Odin, Finnish Defense League, and Suomen Sisu. Member of Parliament Ritva Elomaa of the Finns Party participated in the demonstration and gave a public statement of support. The demonstration sparked an anti-Neo-Nazi demonstration of approximately 1,000 marchers who condemned the presence of what they called Neo-Nazis in the city.

The website *Magneettimedia*, known for its anti-Semitic content, continued to post defamatory statements online. In September it published an article entitled “The Concentration of Power in the Jewish Elite” stating that the “global Jewish or Zionist conspiracy” is behind “the collapse of modern society.” The former owner of *Magneettimedia*, Juha Karkkainen, continued to publish anti-Semitic editorials in the newspaper *KauppaSuomi*, a periodical available through his large chain of department stores with what it said was a circulation of 270,000. In addition to these two outlets, online Finnish media outlets critical of Islam and Judaism increased in popularity, notably *Oikea Media* and *Kansalainen.fi*. Major Finnish consumer brands continued to boycott the Karkkainen chain of department stores, citing anti-Semitic public statements by Karkkainen.

Muslim groups continued to seek adequate houses of worship to match their growing population. Plans for a “Grand Mosque and Oasis Center” in central Helsinki collapsed in December 2017 amid questions about the foreign financing of the project and political resistance both inside and outside the Muslim community. According to press reports, conservative politicians and nationalist groups said they opposed the project due to concerns it would foster violent extremism. With the exception of a handful of purpose-built mosques, the majority of mosques were located in converted commercial spaces.

According to press reports, a mosque of the Islamic Society of Northern Finland located in Oulu was vandalized twice in December. In the first incident, unknown persons defaced the interior of the mosque and destroyed its inventory of frozen halal meat. In the second incident, on Christmas Eve, the perpetrators smashed a mosque window.

A member of the Jewish community said privately that high-profile Jewish sites in Helsinki were regular targets for graffiti during the year. He said the community preferred not to publicize the incidents.

Due in part to the sponsorship of the national government, civil society groups dedicated to promoting interreligious dialogue expanded their capabilities during the year. The National Forum for Cooperation of Religions, which brought together representatives from the largest religious denominations, gathered testimony from their respective congregations for a report on hate crimes commissioned by the public victim-support service. The group had not issued the report by year’s end, but preliminary findings indicated that Muslim women were at particular risk for harassment in public spaces. Representatives of religious groups attended ceremonies hosted in their counterparts’ houses of worship. Finn

Church Aid, associated with the ELC, hosted its first interreligious iftar celebration; the late-night June event brought together representatives from the major religious denominations in the capital region, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA), and municipal governments.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy staff met with officials from the MOJ, MOI, and MFA to discuss religious intolerance, the promotion of interfaith dialogue, the treatment of religious converts in asylum adjudication, and regulations covering male circumcision and government registration of religions.

Embassy staff met with Christian, Jewish, and Muslim clergy and community activists, the Finnish Ecumenical Council, Jehovah's Witnesses, and other minority religious groups to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. Topics discussed with members of the Jewish and Muslim communities included their shared concerns about the impact of the government guidelines discouraging male circumcision, the increasing number of religiously motivated crimes, proposed legislation that would prohibit forms of religious animal slaughter, and the response to efforts to build a new Islamic house of worship. Embassy staff also discussed anti-Muslim discrimination with members of the Muslim community, most notably at an embassy-hosted iftar celebration with representatives from different Muslim congregations and youth groups. Topics discussed with representatives of the Jehovah's Witness community included changes to the military service exemption and the increase in the number of Jehovah's Witnesses applying for asylum based on persecution for their faith.

On November 1, the Ambassador gave public remarks condemning anti-Semitism at a memorial organized by the Central Council of the Jewish Communities of Finland for the victims of the Pittsburgh Tree of Life Synagogue shooting. Representatives of the Muslim and Christian communities of Helsinki attended in support of the victims and in opposition to acts of anti-Semitism.