

FINLAND

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government did not demonstrate a trend toward either improvement or deterioration in respect for and protection of the right to religious freedom. During the year, the government introduced instruction about Islam into the school curriculum.

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. embassy actively engaged religious and civic groups to promote religious freedom and tolerance through public outreach programs, speakers, and events.

Section I. Religious Demography

Approximately 78 percent of the population belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) and 1 percent to the Orthodox Church. Other religious groups, each accounting for less than 1 percent of the population, include Jehovah's Witnesses, the Free Church of Finland, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Pentecostals, Seventh-Day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Jews.

There are approximately 40,000 Muslims, a 100 percent increase since 1999, primarily due to immigration and high birth rates. An estimated 30,000 Muslims are Sunni and 10,000 are Shiite. The largest Muslim group is ethnic Somali; there are also communities of North Africans, Bosnians, peninsular Arabs, Tartars, Turks, and Iraqis.

The government statistics agency reported on September 30 that the number of persons with no religious affiliation is over one million. An estimated 19 percent of the population either does not belong to any religious group or practices religion "in private," including non-registered Pentecostal worshippers and Muslims.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The law includes the right to profess and practice religion and to express personal belief. Everyone has the right to belong, or to decline to belong, to a religious community. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. There are two state churches: the ELC and the Orthodox Church.

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

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 tax. The ELC receives some income from municipal taxes as well. The church owns and manages its own property and labor arrangements. The church can officially register births, marriages, and deaths. Those who do not want to pay the tax must terminate their membership. Membership can be terminated by contacting the official congregation or the local government registration office.

Church and municipal taxes help defray the cost of running the churches. The state churches record births, deaths, and marriages for members; state registrars do this for other persons.

The 2003 Religious Freedom Act includes regulations on registered religious communities. To be recognized, a religious group 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. There are currently 50 recognized religious groups, most of which have multiple congregations. The act allows persons to belong to more than one denomination; however, most religious communities do not allow their members to do so.

Registered religious communities other than the ELC and the Orthodox Church are also eligible to apply for state funds. Registration as a nonprofit religious community allows the community to form a legal entity that may employ people, purchase property, and make legal claims. The law provides that 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. During the year 200,000 euros (\$268,000) were allocated to 18 communities, amounting to 4.57 euros (\$6.12) per member.

The government does not have a general policy for conscientious objection; only Jehovah's Witnesses are specifically exempt from performing both military and alternative civilian service.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and the Second Day of Christmas.

Government Practices

There were reports of abuses of religious freedom, specifically imprisonment for conscientious objectors other than Jehovah's Witnesses.

Conscripts who refuse military or alternative service may be imprisoned, and in 2011 eight conscientious objectors (COs) were in prison. Some of those imprisoned stated that their objection to performing compulsory military or civilian service was based on religious conviction. COs serve prison terms of 181 days -- the legal maximum sentence and equal to one-half of the 362 days of alternative civilian service. Regular military service varies between 180 and 362 days.

There were at least five open cases of assault filed by the Helsinki District Prosecutor against parents based on the lack of legislation clarifying Finnish law on religious male circumcision. A Finnish Supreme Court decision in 2008 found that in the absence of clear legal guidance, parents should not be prosecuted for assault if the circumcision is carried out according to the requisite medical standards and the person's "own interests as a religious community member."

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

During the year, the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) began to provide an educational book "Salem -- the Path of Islam" for the purpose of teaching about Islam at the elementary school level. The government is funding the preparation of a similar book for secondary level schools. The FNBE also provides a series of textbooks for non-religious groups on ethics as well as educational texts for Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish community members.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuse of religious freedom or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Minority religious groups generally were not subject to discrimination.

A 2011 study by Tampere University indicates that despite the small number of persons who attend church services regularly, citizens have a high regard for churches and their activities, consider their membership important, and still value church ceremonies. Most citizens are baptized and married in churches, confirmation classes are common, and most citizens choose religious burial services. Citizens had mostly positive impressions of Buddhism and Hinduism, but were critical of Islam. Only 6 percent of the survey respondents thought of Islam in positive terms. Four out of five considered persons with strong religious beliefs regardless of religion to be intolerant.

Immigrants did not encounter difficulties in practicing their religious beliefs; however, they sometimes encountered discrimination and xenophobia. Because ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

The Police College of Finland released a study on October 28 that stated that the number of hate crimes reported to the Finnish police was 15 percent lower in 2010 than in 2009. In 6 percent of the reported hate crimes last year, the victim's religion was at least a partial motive. Religiously based hate crimes usually involved verbal assaults, vandalism, graffiti, and occasional reports of discrimination by potential employers.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy conducted outreach events promoting religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy representatives participated in a Holocaust Memorial Day Commemoration event and gave presentations on religious diversity in America.