

## ICELAND

### 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. The state financially supports and promotes Lutheranism as the country's official religion. The Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC), which is the state church, enjoys some advantages not available to other religious groups.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government maintains regular contact with the government and representatives of religious groups to discuss religious freedom and performs outreach to religious and civic groups.

### Section I. Religious Demography

According to the National Statistical Bureau of Iceland, 245,456 persons (77 percent of the population) are members of the state ELC. In 2011, 2,735 individuals resigned from the church, while the church registered 206 new individuals other than infants. Many of those who resigned joined one of the organizationally and financially independent Lutheran Free Churches, which have a total membership of 18,187 (5.7 percent of the population). Although the majority of citizens choose traditional Lutheran rituals to mark events such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals, most Lutherans do not regularly attend Sunday services.

A total of 21,468 persons (6.7 percent) are members of 35 small recognized and registered religious organizations ranging from the Roman Catholic Church (10,455 members) to Church of God Ministry of Jesus Christ International (three members). There are 18,662 individuals (5.8 percent) who belong to other or unspecified religious organizations and 15,802 (4.9 percent) who are not members of any religious organization. There are an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 Muslims living in the country, according to those groups. There are fewer than 100 Jews; followers of Judaism have never requested official recognition.

Foreigners constitute an estimated 80 percent of the Roman Catholic population, mostly from other European countries and the Philippines.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution also provides all persons the right to form religious associations and to practice religion in accordance with their personal beliefs. The constitution bans teachings or practices harmful to good morals or public order.

The official state religion is Lutheranism. Article 62 of the constitution establishes the ELC as the state church and pledges it the state's support and protection. The state operates a network of Lutheran parish churches throughout the country, and the Lutheran bishop appoints state church ministers to these parishes. The state directly pays the salaries of the 149 ministers in the state church, and these ministers are considered public servants under the Ministry of the Interior. These ministers counsel persons of all faiths and offer ecumenical services for marriages and funerals. In addition state radio broadcasts worship services every Sunday morning and daily morning and evening devotions.

The General Penal Code protects religious practice by establishing fines and imprisonment for up to three months for those who publicly deride or belittle the religious doctrines or the worship of a lawful religious association active in the country. The General Penal Code also establishes penalties of fines and up to two years in prison for verbal or physical assault on an individual or group based on religion.

The law provides state subsidies to registered religious organizations. All taxpayers 16 years of age and older must pay a church tax of approximately ISK 8,376 (\$70). Individuals may direct their church tax payments to any of the religious groups the state has officially registered and recognized. Those persons who are not registered as belonging to a religious organization, or who belong to one that is not registered and officially recognized, pay the equivalent of the church tax to the state treasury.

During the year, the government provided the state church approximately ISK 4.4 billion (\$38.3 million). Of that amount, the church tax funded ISK 1.63 billion (\$14.2 million) and general revenues ISK 1.89 billion (\$16.4 million). A cemetery

tax funded the remaining ISK 845 million (\$7.3 million). The state church operates all cemeteries and all recognized religious groups have equal access to them. The church tax also provided ISK 227 million (\$1.97 million) to the other recognized religious groups.

The Ministry of the Interior handles applications for recognition and registration of religious organizations. The law provides for a three-member panel consisting of a theologian, a lawyer, and a social scientist to review applications. To register, a religious organization must “practice a creed or religion that can be linked to the religions of humankind that have historical or cultural roots...be well established...be active and stable...have a core group of members who regularly practice the religion in compliance with its teachings and should pay church taxes....” All registered religious organizations are required to submit an annual report to the ministry describing the organization’s operations over the past year. The law also specifies that the leader of a religious organization must be at least 25 years old and pay taxes in the country. No restrictions or requirements are placed on unregistered religious organizations, which have the same rights as other groups in society.

The law states that parents control the religious affiliation of their children until the children reach the age of 16. Changes in religious affiliation of children under age 16 require the consent of both parents if they both have custody; if only one parent has custody, then the consent of the noncustodial parent is not required. However, the Law on Registered Religious Organizations requires that parents consult their children about any changes children want in their affiliation after the age of 12, and such changes require the requesting children’s signatures. Children at birth are registered as having the same religious affiliation as their mothers, in the absence of specific instructions to the contrary from both parents (or from the mother only if the father is not claiming paternal rights or is unknown).

Virtually all schools are public schools. School grades 1-10 (ages 6-15) are required by law to include instruction in Christianity, ethics, and theology. The law also mandates that general teaching practices be shaped by “the Christian heritage of Icelandic culture, equality, responsibility, concern, tolerance, and respect for human value.” The compulsory curriculum for Christianity, ethics, and theology does, however, suggest a multicultural approach to religious education and places an emphasis on teaching a variety of beliefs. In secondary schools, theology continues to be taught under the rubric of “community studies” along with sociology, philosophy, and history.

The law provides the minister of education with the authority to exempt pupils from instruction in compulsory subjects such as Christianity, ethics, and theology. In practice individual school authorities issue exemptions informally. There is no obligation for school authorities to offer other religious or secular instruction in place of these classes. Some observers have noted that this discourages students or their parents from requesting such exemptions and may isolate students who seek exemptions or put them at risk of bullying in schools.

In October, the Reykjavik City Council passed rules on the access of religious organizations to public schools (grades 1-10) in the municipality. According to the new rules, religious groups were not allowed to conduct any activities, including the distribution of proselytizing material, in the schools during school hours. Any student visits to the gathering places of religious organizations during school hours had to be under the guidance of a teacher as part of a class on religions. Any such instruction could not involve the active participation of students.

The towns of Alftanes and Mosfellsbaer, in cooperation with the state church, continued to run a pastoral care program for students under which a pastor comes to the classroom and provides guidance on a variety of subjects. The Ethical Humanist Association, Sidmennt, and representatives of nonstate religious organizations continued their public criticism of the program's use in public schools, claiming that the pastoral care program contained aspects of religious indoctrination.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Whit Monday, Christmas Eve (afternoon only), Christmas Day, and Boxing Day.

### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

In May the Russian Orthodox Church authorities broke ground for the construction of a Russian Orthodox Church in Reykjavik. The construction of the building is expected to take three to four years.

In April the Reykjavik City Planning Commission said it had tentatively found a suitable plot of land for a mosque for the Association of Muslims in Iceland, but due to bureaucratic delays the Association had not formally received the plot of land. The application to build a mosque was originally filed with the city in 2000.

Previously some observers had suggested that prejudice was behind the delay in approval, since other groups' applications for similar plots made swifter progress during that time. The building that a group of Muslim investors purchased in Reykjavik in 2010 to be used as an Islamic cultural center had not been put to use at the end of the year.

The Ministry of the Interior rejected the registration of three religious organizations. The applications of The Reborn Christian Church of God (Endurfaedd kristin kirkja af Gudi) and The Buddhist Association of the Diamond Way of the Karma Lineage were rejected on the grounds that their core memberships were too small. The third organization was rejected because it was not a religious organization as defined in the law.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. The country is a small, close-knit, homogenous society that closely guards its culture and is not accustomed to accommodating outsiders. Because ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

The Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation, representing major registered religious groups, continued to meet during the year. The forum was established after a meeting in 2005 sponsored by the national church and has the goal of fostering dialogue and strengthening links between religious groups and life stance organizations. The forum states that it is open to all registered religious organizations.

The government is a member of the Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation but does not sponsor programs or an official church-government council to coordinate interfaith dialogue. A Japanese-born minister of the state church has been designated to serve immigrant communities and help recent arrivals of all religious groups integrate into society.

At the end of the year, approximately 1,550 persons remained members of a Facebook group to protest the construction of a mosque in the country. The group organizers claimed terrorist activities often appear to originate in mosques, and preventing the construction of a mosque is therefore a security issue.

On September 22, the chairperson of Reykjavik's welfare committee, Bjork Vilhelmsdottir, posted the phrase "Jewnited States" on her personal Facebook account in response to a statement by the United States that it would veto any majority ruling in the UN granting Palestine statehood. During an interview, Vilhelmsdottir, who is married to the head of the Iceland-Palestine Society, stated "The Jews control Congress and the White House," and "the U.S. has used this veto power in the UN 47 times regarding Israel." Vilhelmsdottir removed the Facebook post after learning hate groups use the term usually in reference to the myth of a world Jewish conspiracy.

No other anti-Semitic incidents were reported.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials regularly discussed religious freedom with local leaders representing a broad spectrum of religious groups and nongovernmental organizations. In August the embassy invited members of the Muslim community, as well as state church officials and representatives of other religious organizations, to the ambassador's residence for an iftar to celebrate Ramadan.