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Iceland

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period. 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. The church provides social services regardless of creed.

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

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 39,600 square miles and a population of 300,000. Reykjavik and its environs are home to approximately 60 percent of the population.

According to the National Statistical Bureau, 251,487 persons (79 percent of the population) are members of the state ELC. In 2009, 1,982 individuals resigned from the church, while the church baptized 238 new registrants 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 16,497 (5.2 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 19,663 persons (6.2 percent) are members of 27 other small recognized and registered religious organizations ranging from the Roman Catholic Church (9,672 members) to Homechurch (11 members). There are 19,647 individuals (6.2 percent) who belong to other or unspecified religious organizations and 10,336 (3.3 percent) who are not members of any religious organization. There are also religions, such as Judaism, that have been practiced in the country for years but whose followers have never requested official recognition. The National Statistical Bureau does not maintain data on Jewish community numbers, and there is no synagogue or Jewish cultural center; however, up to 60 persons attend occasional Jewish events and activities are organized by a few Jewish immigrants.

Foreigners constitute an estimated 80 percent of the Roman Catholic population. The Roman Catholic Church in Iceland estimates that totals for registered members may capture only one-half of the actual number of Catholics in the country. The Reykjavik Catholic Church holds one regular weekly English-language service, and a number of Poles, Filipinos, and Lithuanians attend. Services are also conducted in other languages in other areas nationwide. The Catholic congregation includes a large number of Poles, served by four Polish priests. In addition to Icelandic and Polish priests, the Catholic Church employs priests from Argentina, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom. Since there are few Catholic churches outside of Reykjavik, Lutheran ministers regularly lend their churches to Catholic priests so that they can conduct Masses for members in rural areas.

There are two registered religious organizations representing Islam and approximately 1,000 to 1,500 Muslims living in the country, according to those groups. The Association of Muslims in Iceland (Felag muslima a Islandi), founded in 1997, has 373 members, and the Islamic Cultural Center of Iceland (Menningarsetur muslima a Islandi), registered in 2009, counts 218 members. Muslims are concentrated in the capital area (although there are a number of Kosovar Muslim refugees in the small northern town of Dalvik). The two organizations have their own houses of worship for evening prayers and weekly Friday prayers that attract a core group of approximately 50-60 and 60-70 individuals, respectively.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. 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. Parliament has the power to pass a law to change this article. The state operates a network of Lutheran parish churches throughout the country, and the Lutheran bishop of Iceland appoints state church ministers to these parishes. The state directly pays the salaries of the 139 ministers in the state church, and these ministers are considered public servants under the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights. 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 devotions morning and night.

Sidmennt, the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, which has approximately 300 members, strongly supports legislation to separate church and state.

Although a large portion of society is not particularly religious, many citizens choose to mark traditional Lutheran rituals. According to statistics from the state church, nine of 10 children are baptized in their first year, more than 90 percent of adolescents are confirmed, and 75 percent of the total population is married in the church. State church ministers and facilities are also frequently utilized by non-ELC members.

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.

A 1999 law sets specific conditions and procedures that religious organizations must follow to gain state subsidies. All taxpayers 16 years of age and older must pay a church tax of approximately ISK 9,204 (\$79 in 2010)--lowered from ISK 10,260 in 2009. Individuals may direct their church tax payments to any of the religious groups the state has officially registered and recognized. According to a June 2009 amendment to the law on church taxes, 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. Previously the tax payment for those who were not members of a registered religious organization went to the University of Iceland, a secular institution. Atheists and ethical humanists, who had previously objected to having their fees go to the university, continued to object to the tax payment going to the state treasury.

During the reporting period, the government provided the state church approximately ISK 4.8 billion (\$41 million). Of that amount, the church tax funded ISK 1.8 billion (\$15.5 million), and general revenues ISK 2.04 billion (\$17.5 million). A cemetery tax funded the remaining ISK 917 million (\$7.9 million). The state church operates all cemeteries; however, all recognized religious groups have equal access to the country's cemeteries. The church tax also provided ISK 240 million (\$2.06 million) to the other recognized religious groups, and ISK 110 million (\$948,000) to the University of Iceland before the amended law took effect.

In 2008 the European Court of Human Rights agreed to take up a suit brought by the Icelandic Pagan Association (Asatruarfelagid) over its claimed right to receive additional state funding beyond the group's proportional funding of the church tax, in the same way that the state church receives additional monies. The association lost at the district (2006) and Supreme Court (2007) levels and appealed to the European Court of Human Rights. The case had not been heard by the end of the reporting period.

The Ministry of Justice and Human Rights 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 Ministry of Justice and Human Rights approved the registration of one religious organization during the reporting period: in July the House of Prayer (Baenahusid). In September the ministry rejected the application of the Community of Ethiopian Evangelical Christians, and in October it rejected the application of Tenrikyo.

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 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.

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 program, which is not mandatory, was introduced in those towns in 2006 and 1999, respectively. Without any involvement by the Ministry of Education, school authorities and the municipality where a school is located decide if they want to offer the program. 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 does not sponsor programs or an official church-government council to coordinate interfaith dialogue; however, it is a member of the Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation. In addition many church groups sponsor meetings between the leaders of various religious organizations. 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.

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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The government generally respected religious freedom in law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

In 2008 the City of Reykjavik awarded a plot of land to the Icelandic Pagan Association to build a place of worship. Bureaucratic delays and funding constraints during the reporting period continued to postpone the start of construction of the association's place of worship.

In 2007 the city approved a detailed land use plan that included a plot of land available for the construction of a Russian Orthodox church. Leasing and architectural design discussions were under way at the end of the reporting period.

In September the Reykjavik City Planning Commission started looking for a suitable plot of land for a mosque for the Association of Muslims in Iceland. 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. In addition to the progress made on securing land for a mosque, during the reporting period a group of Muslim investors purchased a building in Reykjavik for an Islamic cultural center. The cultural center is envisioned as a place for prayers, as well as cultural and educational activities, but the building had not been put to use at the end of the reporting period.

There were no reports of abuses, including religious prisoners or detainees, in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. If members of religious minorities face discrimination, it is indirect in nature, taking the form of prejudice and lack of interfaith or intercultural understanding. The country has a small, close-knit, homogenous society that closely guards its culture and is not accustomed to accommodating outsiders. Although most citizens are not active members of the state church, Lutheranism remains an important part of the country's cultural identity.

The Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation, representing major registered religious groups, continued to meet during the reporting period. 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.

At the end of the reporting period, approximately 1,700 persons had joined a Facebook group to protest the construction of a mosque in the country. The group organizers claimed terrorist activities appear to often originate in mosques, and that preventing the construction of a mosque is therefore a security issue.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom with the government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. 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.

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