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## Finland

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **International Religious Freedom Report 2010**

**November 17, 2010**

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. According to law, the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) and the Orthodox Church are the established state churches.

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

There were no reports of societal abuses of religious freedom 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 130,127 square miles and a population of 5.3 million. Approximately 81 percent of the population belongs to the ELC and 1 percent to the Orthodox Church. There are seven Roman Catholic congregations with 10,000 estimated registered members, and two Jewish congregations with approximately 1,500 members. Pentecostal church communities registered as associations have an estimated 45,000 members. Only a fraction of Pentecostal churches are registered, however, and the actual number of Pentecostal worshippers is considerably higher.

There are approximately 40,000 Muslims, compared with an estimated 1,000 in 1990 and 15,000 to 20,000 in 1999. In 2009 registered communities consisted of approximately 8,000 Muslims. Their numbers continued to grow due to immigration and a high birthrate. Of these, approximately 30,000 are Sunni and up to 10,000 are Shiite. The largest group is Somali; there are also communities of North Africans, Bosnians, peninsula Arabs, Tartars, Turks, and Iraqis. There are four major Muslim organizations: the Muslim Community in Finland, the Tampere Muslim Community, Shi'a Muslims, and the Multicultural Dawa Center of Islam.

Membership in nonstate but government registered religious groups, which includes some Muslims, totals approximately 64,000. The number of all persons practicing nonstate religions is estimated to be 140,000. The discrepancy is because the government limits its statistics to persons officially registered as members of a particular church or other congregation. An estimated 17.1 percent of the population does not belong to any religious group or they practice their religion "in private" (this figure also includes most Pentecostal worshippers and Muslims).

The rapid modernization of society has modified attitudes toward religion. Society has become more secular, political and social philosophy has diverged from religious philosophy, and religious belief largely has become a private matter. Research indicates, however, that most citizens still consider religion and spirituality very significant in their lives. Despite the small number of persons who attend church services regularly, citizens have a high regard for the church and its activities, consider their membership important, and still value church ceremonies. Most citizens are baptized and married in the church, confirmation classes are common, and most citizens choose religious burial services.

As many as 490,000 persons have left the ELC over the past two decades. An estimated 45,000 members left the ELC during the reporting period, slightly fewer than during the previous period, while approximately 10,000 joined. Separation from the church has risen markedly since implementation of the Religious Freedom Act of 2003--there were approximately 16,000 separations that year--which made separation much easier. Catholics, Muslims, Jews, and "nontraditional" religious groups freely profess and propagate their beliefs. Such groups as Jehovah's Witnesses and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) have been active for decades.

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

### Legal/Policy Framework

The law provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law includes the right to profess and practice religion and to express personal belief. Everyone has the right to belong, or decline to belong, to a religious community. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion.

The religious affiliation of a child does not automatically follow that of a parent. Membership in or resignation from a religious community is always based on a separate expression of the will of the parents or guardians, such as baptism. The denomination of any person older than 12 can be changed only with his or her consent.

All citizens who belong to either state church--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. Those who do not want to pay the tax must separate from membership. These 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 government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and Second Day of Christmas.

The Religious Freedom Act of 2003 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. The government recognizes 54 religious groups.

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. The law provides that communities with 200 or more active members may receive a statutory subsidy from the annual government budget. Twenty-five communities with a total estimated membership of 64,000 qualified by the end of the reporting period. In 2009, \$286,000 (200,000 euro) was allocated to 20 communities, amounting to \$6.94 (4.85 euro) per member.

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All public schools provide religious and philosophical instruction; students may choose to study either subject. In certain Helsinki-area schools, Muslim students outnumber members of the country's second largest religious group, Orthodoxy. Countrywide, the number of Muslim students has increased by approximately 20 percent each year over the past three years. This trend was expected to continue based on current asylum and refugee trends and the group's high birth rate.

In May 2010 seven conscientious objectors (COs) were in prison. Two possible scenarios may affect COs: (1) a conscript may go directly to the military but then refuse service, for which the Ministry of Defense sentences 7 to 12 persons annually, generally to imprisonment, or (2) a conscript may opt to go to the Ministry of Employment and Economic Development for alternative service; if the CO then decides not to comply, or begins but then fails to continue alternative civilian service, he falls under civilian law, which parallels military law on this subject. The outcome is also generally imprisonment for the same term as for a military objector. In 2009, 25 persons were reported to the police for refusing to perform their service or being accused of crimes such as drunkenness while serving or being absent without leave.

COs serve prison terms of 181 days--the legal maximum sentence and equal to one-half the 362 days of alternative civilian service. Regular military service varies between 180 and 362 days. Some of those imprisoned stated that their objection to performing compulsory military or civilian service was based on religious conviction. Jehovah's Witnesses are specifically exempt from performing both military and alternative civilian service.

There was no evidence that the government singled out individuals for prosecution because of their religious beliefs or membership in a religious minority.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

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

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion.

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

There were no reports of religious freedom violations by societal actors. There were no reports of anti-Semitic incidents.

Nontraditional religious groups generally were not subject to discrimination, despite the occasional expression of intolerant

attitudes by some members of society.

Immigrants did not encounter difficulties in practicing their religious beliefs; however, they sometimes encountered discrimination and xenophobia.

Some citizens were not receptive to proselytizing by adherents of nontraditional religious groups, in part because they regarded religion as a private matter.

There is a history of disputes between the ELC leadership and those of its clergy who refused to cooperate with female ministers, and this conflict continued during the reporting period. The recalcitrant clergy are clearly in the minority, as Irja Askola was elected in June 2010 to be the country's first female ELC bishop. Expected to take office in September 2010, she won a narrow election that saw a 93 percent turn-out of voters, who consisted of ministers, nonordained staff, and lay members.

This move towards gender equality in the clergy was also reflected in a recent court case involving a male chaplain in Oulu who was suspended from his post for eight months after he refused to work with a female priest. The chaplain filed a complaint with the Administrative Court; the suit worked its way through the judicial system until the Supreme Administrative Court ruled in May 2010 that the suspension was legal. This ruling clarified in law the principal of gender equality for religious workers.

The Finnish ELC and Orthodox churches do not provide church marriage ceremonies for same-sex couples.

Kari Mäkinen, currently bishop of Turku and the Finnish ELC archbishop-elect, supports the ordination of women and blessing of same-sex marriages. Programs available through the Ministries of Education and Labor focus on combating discrimination, including religious discrimination.

#### 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. Embassy representatives periodically met with representatives of religious communities--both mainstream and nontraditional--to discuss religious freedom topics.

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