

FINLAND 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. A limited number of political actors made derogatory statements about, or argued for restrictions on, practices of minority religious groups.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, including anti-Semitic publications and attempts to restrict religious attire in the workplace.

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.3 million (July 2013 estimate). Approximately 76 percent 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, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jews, and members of the Free Church of Finland. The government statistics agency reported in 2011 that the number of persons with no religious affiliation is over one million. There are approximately 60,000 Muslims, a more than 100 percent increase since 1999. These rapid increases are primarily due to immigration and high birth rates among immigrant communities.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom, including 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. The law criminalizes the breach of the sanctity of religion, prevention of worship, and breach of the sanctity of the grave (e.g., disturbances of funeral ceremonies).

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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. For these two groups, church and municipal taxes help to fund youth programs, church staffing, and maintenance of religious building and cemeteries. Both the ELC and the Orthodox Church own and manage their property and make their own labor arrangements. Both can register births, marriages, and deaths for its members in collaboration with the Population Register Center, the national registry under Ministry of Finance purview. State registrars do this for other persons. Those who do not want to pay the tax must terminate their ELC or Orthodox congregation membership. Membership can be terminated by contacting the official congregation or the local government registration office.

The ELC and Orthodox Church are autonomous. The government has no legal authority to alter the content of proposals from the churches' governing bodies or to appoint clergy. Local parishes have fiscal autonomy to decide how to use funding received from taxes levied on their members.

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

The law 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 96 recognized religious groups, most of which have multiple congregations. The law allows persons to belong to more than one religious group.

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 a community to form a legal entity that may employ persons, 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 in proportion to the religious group's percentage of the population.

All public schools provide religious teaching in accordance with the religion of the students, or broader philosophical instruction for students who do not belong to a religion. Adult students (18 years of age) may choose to study either subject.

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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 religion in question must be registered in Finland and the students' families must belong to the religion. If a student belongs to more than one religious community, the parent decides in which religious education course the student participates. Religious education in Finland is non-confessional, does not include religious worship, and although the teacher must have the required training for religious instruction, the teacher does not have to belong to any religious community. The Finnish National Board of Education provides a series of textbooks about Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam, as well as a textbook on secular ethics.

The government allows conscientious objectors to choose alternative civilian service; only Jehovah's Witnesses are specifically exempt from performing both military and alternative civilian service. Other conscientious objectors who refuse both military and alternative civilian service may be imprisoned. A working group established in 2012 by the defense minister continues to review the exemption granted to Jehovah's Witnesses in comparison to the lack of exemption for other groups. Conscientious objectors serve prison terms of 173 days — the maximum legal sentence — which is equal to one-half of the 347 days of alternative civilian service. Regular military service varies between 165 and 347 days.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, formerly the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

Government Practices

According to the Ministry of Justice, there were 43 objectors to both military and alternative civilian service in 2013, 14 of whom were imprisoned. Twenty-nine objectors were allowed to serve their sentence on home arrest but were required to wear electronic ankle monitors. The Conscientious Objector Association of Finland estimated that some objectors asserted that their objection to performing compulsory military or civilian service was based on religious conviction. According to media reports, the government exempted some 100-200 Jehovah's Witnesses from military service each year.

On May 31, the media reported that the deputy state prosecutor charged Juha Karkkainen, the publisher of the *Magneettimedia* newspaper, which is circulated free of charge to over 350,000 homes in the Oulu, Lahti, and Kokkola

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areas, with inciting hatred against an ethnic group. The newspaper translated and republished three anti-Semitic articles by two American and one Argentine authors. The district court found Karkkainen guilty October 21, and ordered his publishing company to pay a fine of 45,000 euros (\$61,983). On July 25, Magneettimedia published a biographic profile about an American pastor who writes anti-Semitic literature. At the end of the year Magneettimedia ceased publication.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses of religious freedom or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Members of minority religious groups generally experienced this discrimination to a greater degree than others.

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.

In an August 19 blog post criticizing immigration in Finland, Teuvo Hakkarainen, a member of parliament from the opposition Finns Party, said that the “West is being flooded with millions of Muslims as part of a Trojan Horse from which they will wait as ‘moderates’ to be called into jihad.” He went on to say that no one should think that they are safe including “those that brought these Islamists here.” Hakkarainen also referred to the Finnish foreign minister as an “imam” who “didn’t want to awake to the truth.”

Another Finns Party parliamentarian, Vesa-Matti Saarakkala, during a radio interview in May said religious male circumcision is an issue in which “politicians should intervene [to outlaw the practice]...which has to do with the integrity of the individual.” Saarakkala, also called for a ban on wearing veils that conceal the face, advocating a fine imposed on those who do so. He said that the full veil “degrades women.”

In early May a Sikh bus driver was banned from wearing his turban on the job. He did not bring suit against his employer but conducted activities to raise awareness about the case, advocating for greater understanding of minority religious practices.

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Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. embassy conducted events promoting religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy staff met with various religious leaders, including representatives from minority religions, to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country.

Embassy staff also met with government officials from the ministries of education, interior, and justice to discuss religious instruction in schools and conscientious objectors. The embassy's public affairs section arranged for Finnish participation in visitor exchange programs in the United States on religious pluralism and its intersection with American democracy.