



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report](#) » [Europe and Eurasia](#) » [Finland](#)

Finland

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.

There was an isolated report of societal abuse of religious freedom or discrimination possibly 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 Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) and 1 percent to the Orthodox Church. According to law, the ELC and Orthodox Church are the established state churches. There are seven Roman Catholic congregations (with an estimated 10,000 registered members) and two Jewish congregations (with approximately 1,500 members). The Pentecostal Church of Finland has 46,000 members according to the church's official statistics.

There are approximately 40,000 Muslims, compared with an estimated 1,000 in 1990 and 15,000 to 20,000 in 1999, an increase attributable primarily to immigration and a high birth rate. In 2009 registered communities consisted of approximately 8,000 Muslims. An estimated 30,000 Muslims are Sunni, and up to 10,000 are Shiite. The largest Muslim group is ethnic Somali; there are also communities of North Africans, Bosnians, peninsula Arabs, Tartars, Turks, and

Iraqis. There are four major Islamic organizations: the Muslim Community in Finland, the Tampere Muslim Community, Shia Muslims in Finland, and the Multicultural Dawa Center of Islam.

Membership in nonstate but government-registered religious groups, which include some Muslims, totals approximately 64,000, although an estimated 140,000 persons in total adhere to nonstate religions. The discrepancy in totals arises because the government limits its statistics to persons officially registered as members of a particular church or other congregation. An estimated 17 percent of the population does not belong to any religious group or practices religion "in private" (this figure includes most Pentecostal worshippers and Muslims, among others).

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.

Nonetheless, as many as 550,000 persons have left the ELC over the past two decades. Separation from the church has risen markedly since implementation of the 2003 Religious Freedom Act, which made separation much easier.

The ELC experienced an unprecedented exodus of members during the reporting period, which observers attributed to an October 12 televised debate on the national network of the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE), which dealt with issues such as the right of homosexuals to adopt children and the establishment of gender-neutral marriage.

The newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* reported on November 9 that an estimated 41,000 members had left the ELC after the YLE broadcast but noted that not all members who expressed their intention to resign via the Web site had left the church, since not all of them had submitted their resignation documents to magistrates to complete the process.

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

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 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 years old can be changed only with his or her consent.

All citizens who belong to either the ELC or the Orthodox Church--the established state churches--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 terminate their 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 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. The government recognizes 54 religious groups.

The C
Affair
the U
Exter
cons:
polici

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 December. During the year 200,000 euros (\$268,000) was allocated to 30 communities, amounting to 4.60 euros (\$6.16) per member.

Conscripts who refuse military or alternative service may be imprisoned, and in May seven conscientious objectors (COs) were in prison. 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. 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.

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.

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.

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

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

On August 1, the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) implemented a new curriculum for basic and general upper secondary education that is focused on defining human rights crimes, with a particular emphasis on the Holocaust. Although the curriculum has taught about the Holocaust since the 1950s, the FNBE took this action to underscore its historic importance. The country became a full member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust on December 16.

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

There was an isolated report of societal abuse of religious freedom or discrimination possibly based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

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. Police are investigating as possible arson a fire that occurred on September 11 at the construction site of a Buddhist temple in Turku, the first to be built in the country. The same site previously had been vandalized, including a failed attempt to burn sheets that had been hung on the walls of the building.

The Police Academy of Finland, published a study on November 3 titled "Hate Crimes Reported to Police in Finland in 2009" which stated that 8.2 percent of all hate crimes reported to the police were based on religion. The majority of the 1,007 hate crime cases reported in 2009 related to ethnic or foreign national background (85.2 percent).

On October 24, the Supreme Court ruled that a pastor who refused to work with a female colleague was guilty of discrimination. It was the country's first case involving discrimination against female clergy. The court's decision held that religious freedom does not supersede antidiscrimination laws. A district court had fined the pastor 320 euros (\$413); the appeals court and the Supreme Court upheld the fine.

On October 28, the Helsinki Court of Appeal overturned charges of inciting racial hatred brought against local politician Jussi Halla-aho because the court found that Halla-aho's blog writings on Somalis were within the bounds of lawful exaggeration and provocation. Despite this judgment, the same Court of Appeals upheld his earlier conviction for defaming religion and fined him 330 euros (\$453).

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.

[Back to Top](#)