



Iceland

International Religious Freedom Report 2007

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice; however, the state financially supports and promotes Lutheranism as the country's official religion.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion. The Evangelical Lutheran Church, which is the state church, enjoys some advantages not available to other faiths and provides social services regardless of creed.

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

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues 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 307,000. The area surrounding the capital, Reykjavik, is home to approximately 60 percent of the population.

According to the National Statistical Bureau, 252,234 persons (82 percent of the population) are members of the state Lutheran Church. During the reporting period, 1,452 individuals resigned from the church, as against 240 new registrants other than infants baptized. Many of those who resigned joined one of the organizationally and financially independent Lutheran Free Churches, which has a total membership of 14,482 persons (4.7 percent of the population). The breakdown in membership is as follows: Reykjavik Free Church--7,009; Hafnarfjordur Free Church--4,757; and Reykjavik Independent Church--2,716. A total of 15,804 persons (5.1 percent) are members of 25 other small recognized and registered religious organizations ranging from the Roman Catholic Church (7,283 members) to the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (4 members). There are 16,744 individuals (5.4 percent) who belong to other or unspecified religious organizations and 7,997 (2.6 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 members have never requested official recognition. The National Statistical Bureau does not keep track of Jewish community numbers, and there is no synagogue or Jewish cultural center; however, up to 60 persons attend occasional Jewish holiday parties and themed lectures and discussions organized by a few Jewish immigrants. A number of academic studies reported that between 16 and 23 percent of the population identifies itself either as atheist or agnostic.

Although the majority of citizens use traditional Lutheran rituals to mark events such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals, most Lutherans do not regularly attend Sunday services.

The number of foreigners receiving residence permits increased significantly during the past several years. In direct relation to the increase in foreigners (itinerant workers, immigrants, and refugees), the number of religious organizations significantly increased. Foreigners make up more than half of the Roman Catholic population. The Reykjavik Catholic Church holds one weekly English service, and many Filipinos attend. Services are also conducted in other languages in other Catholic churches and chapels around the country. A growing number of Catholic Poles, served by three Polish priests, live in the country, working in the fishing and shipbuilding industries. The Catholic Church also employs priests from Argentina, France, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Slovakia. 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.

The Association of Muslims in Iceland (Felag Muslima a Islandi), founded in 1997, has 352 members (out of approximately 800 to 1000 Muslims living in the country, according to the association). Muslims are mostly concentrated in the capital

area (although there are a number of Kosovar Muslim refugees in the small northern town of Dalvik). Since 2002 the community has had its own house of worship, with daily prayer nights and weekly Friday prayers that attract a core group of approximately 30 individuals.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) accounted for the only significant foreign missionary activity. The U.S.-based First Baptist Church of Iceland in Keflavik, which primarily served U.S. military personnel at Naval Air Station Keflavik, was still functioning after the closure of the facility in late 2006.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The official state religion is Lutheranism.

The Constitution provides all persons the right to form religious associations and to practice religion in accordance with their personal beliefs. It also bans teaching or practices harmful to good morals or public order. In addition the General Penal Code protects religious practice by establishing fines and imprisonment for up to 3 months for those who publicly deride or belittle the religious doctrines or worship of a lawful religious association active in the country.

Article 62 of the Constitution establishes the Evangelical Lutheran Church as the state church and pledges the state's support and protection. Parliament has the power to pass a law to change this article. Although Gallup polls show that the majority of citizens favor the concept of separation of church and state, most probably would not support the change if it meant closing Lutheran churches because of lack of funding. According to the State Church Bishop's Office, 9 out of 10 children are baptized in their first year, more than 90 percent of adolescents are confirmed, 75 percent are married in the church, and 99 percent are buried with church ceremonies. Although few citizens regularly attend services, they see the Lutheran religion as part of their culture and view the closing of a church as losing a part of their heritage. No political parties have renewed the October 2004 parliamentary motion by the Social Democratic Alliance on constitutional amendments to include the separation of church and state. Sidmennt, the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association, which has approximately 200 members, strongly supports legislation to separate church and state. An October 2005 Gallup poll found two-thirds of the general population, led by men, capital-area residents, and younger, wealthier, better educated people, in favor of separation.

The state directly pays the salaries of the 140 ministers in the state church, and these ministers are considered public servants under the Ministry of Judicial and Ecclesiastical Affairs. These ministers counsel persons of all faiths and offer ecumenical services for marriages and funerals. In March 2007 the Parliament passed a bill amending the law on the state church, under which the Government is supposed to relinquish vicarages--both land and residences--to the state church for ownership. This will require increased annual funding for the state church to cover maintenance expenses. The new law also states that the Lutheran Bishop of Iceland shall appoint ministers, a power previously granted to the Minister of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs. The state operates a network of Lutheran parish churches throughout the country. In new housing areas, land automatically is set aside for the construction of a parish church to serve the neighborhood. State radio broadcasts worship services every Sunday morning and daily devotions morning and night, contributing to state Lutheran domination of religion-oriented broadcasting.

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 \$135 (ISK 9,468) a year. Individuals may direct their church tax payments to any of the religious groups officially registered and recognized by the state. For persons who are not registered as belonging to a religious organization, or who belong to one that is not registered, the tax payment goes to the University of Iceland, a secular institution. Atheists have objected to having their fee go to the university, asserting that this is inconsistent with the constitutional right of freedom of association.

During the period covered by this report, the Government gave the state church approximately \$67.2 million (ISK 4.7 billion). Of that amount, the church tax funded \$26.2 million (ISK 1.8 billion), the cemetery tax \$11.2 million (ISK 787.3 million), and general revenues \$29.7 million (ISK 2.08 billion). The state church operates all cemeteries, and the money from the cemetery tax must be used solely for this purpose. All recognized religious denominations have equal access to the country's cemeteries. The church tax also provided \$2.9 million (ISK 205 million) to the other recognized religions and \$1.9 million (ISK 136 million) to the University of Iceland.

In January 2006 the Icelandic Pagan Association (Asatuarfelagith) sued the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs and the Ministry of Finance to receive funding proportional to its membership from monies currently made available only to the state church. These monies supplement the income that the national church receives from church taxes, exclusively

favoring state Lutheranism in violation of article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights, according to the plaintiff. In November 2006 the Reykjavik District Court ruled in favor of the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs and the Ministry of Finance. The ruling stated that the state church has to undertake many projects by law, and therefore it is not unjust that it gets more funding from the state than other religious organizations. The Icelandic Pagan Association appealed the verdict, and the Supreme Court was expected to take up the case in September 2007.

The Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs 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 the applications. To become registered, 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. During the reporting period, one group, The Community of Christ in Reykjavik, applied to register as a religious organization. The application was denied on grounds of the church not being sufficiently well-established. In the previous year, two organizations had their registration applications denied on similar grounds; neither group had reapplied by the end of the reporting period.

The law confirms that parents control the religious affiliation of their children until the children reach the age of 16. However, the Children's Act requires that parents consult their children about any changes in the children's affiliation after the age of 12, and such changes required the requesting children's signatures. In the absence of specific instructions to the contrary, children at birth are registered as having the same religious affiliation as their mother.

By law the Government requires instruction in Christianity, ethics, and theology during the period of compulsory education; that is, ages 6 through 15. Virtually all schools are public schools. All schools are subject to Law Number 66 with respect to compulsory curriculum. However, the precise content of this instruction can vary, and some observers have claimed that religious indoctrination can take place, as the curriculum is not rigid and teachers often are given wide latitude in the classroom. Some teachers place greater emphasis on ethical and philosophical issues rather than on specifically religious instruction. Lessons on non-Christian religions are part of the curriculum, but teachers teach mostly about Christianity, based on the creed's historically strong influence on the country's society and culture.

In the fall of 2006 several secondary schools in the towns of Gardabaer and Alftanes started offering a state church-run pastoral care program for students. The Ethical Humanist Association Sidmennt and representatives from nonstate religious organizations publicly criticized the program's introduction in these schools, claiming that the pastoral care program contained aspects of religious indoctrination. Those who support the program--which has also been in place in the town of Mosfellsbaer since 1999, largely without incident--state that it is merely a means for students to talk about their feelings with a minister or a deacon and note that participation in the program is not mandatory. A minority of students took advantage of the service.

Students may be exempted from Christianity classes. The law provides the Minister of Education with the formal authority to exempt pupils from instruction in compulsory subjects such as Christianity. 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 Christianity 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 December 2006 the Ministry of Education published a new curriculum for Christianity, ethics, and religious studies in primary schools. The curriculum suggested a more multicultural and intellectual approach to religious education and a greater emphasis on teaching a variety of beliefs. The curriculum was scheduled to come into effect on August 1, 2007. In secondary schools, theology would continue to be taught under the rubric of "community studies" along with sociology, philosophy, and history.

The Ministry of Education took no direct action relating to several problematic textbooks at the secondary school level. In the 2005-06 school year, some secondary schools adopted a new locally-published textbook on world religions. At the time of the book's introduction, minority religious organizations, while praising the book's comprehensive coverage, criticized inaccuracies in its discussion of non-Christian faiths and for describing atheism as a religion. Observers also criticized a secondary school history textbook for a number of errors regarding Islam. Under national law and Ministry of Education policy, secondary schools are allowed to choose which textbooks they will use, and there is little central authority to limit the use of particular books. During the reporting period, there were no new complaints voiced about these or other instructional texts.

The Government does not actively promote interfaith understanding. The Government does not sponsor programs or official church-government councils to coordinate interfaith dialogue, but 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 the immigrant community and help recent arrivals of all faiths integrate into society. Holocaust education is not a required element of the national school program, but the subject is taught in most elementary and secondary schools as part of a mandatory history curriculum.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

A 2000 application for land to build a mosque continued to languish in Reykjavik's planning commission. In previous years the city cited competing claims for the land in question and expressed concern that tensions could arise if Muslims and Orthodox Christians were to erect adjacent facilities, as they had been looking at the same site. While in 2005 and prior years there were acknowledged tensions, occasionally leading to arguments between Reykjavik's small Muslim Kosovar and Orthodox Serb communities, religious leaders told authorities they had no qualms about worshipping in close proximity. Some observers continued to express concern that prejudice was behind the delay in approval of mosque construction, particularly given that other group's applications for similar plots made swifter progress during that time. In late November 2006 the city stated that the application was still under review.

In November, 2006, after a bureaucratic process spanning several years, the Reykjavik City Executive Board signed a statement of intent granting the Russian Orthodox Church a plot of land on which to build a house of worship. The church found the delays frustrating, and some observers have noted that the statement of intent falls short of full authorization to build a house of worship. The statement of intent was contingent on approval of a detailed land use plan.

In November, 2006, the Reykjavik City Executive Board signed a declaration of intent to award a plot of land to the Pagan Society of Iceland to build a place of worship. In this case, the allocation was independent of any other rezoning needs, and the Pagan Society hoped to begin construction during the summer of 2007.

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

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Anti-Semitism

There were no reports of physical violence against Jews. Harassment of the country's tiny Jewish community was infrequent and not organized.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious 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.

In November and December 2006, an anonymous 14-page letter featuring inflammatory anti-Muslim language and illustrations was sent to a number of citizens, including many politicians. Some of those who received the letter, although not Muslim, stated that they intended to file charges under the country's religious defamation law. A police investigation regarding the origin of the letter was inconclusive, and no charges were filed by the end of the reporting period.

Muslims in the country, seconded by independent observers, expressed concern that Omega, a Christian television station, broadcast distorted, negative coverage of Muslims and Islam. The station's broadcast area included approximately 75 percent of the country's population.

Unlike in the previous year, there were no reports of isolated incidents involving inebriated individuals verbally harassing veiled Muslim women on the streets of Reykjavik. In May 2005 the national church for the first time organized an interfaith meeting of the leaders of major registered religious groups (defined as those with 150 or more members). In November 2006 the attendees established a permanent Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation that would foster dialogue and

strengthen links between religious groups and life-stance organizations. The forum is open to all religious organizations that are registered with the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy also maintains a regular dialogue on religious freedom issues with the leaders of various religious groups and nongovernmental organizations.

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