

# **ICELAND 2012 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. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. The state financially supports and promotes Lutheranism as the country's official religion. As the state church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) has some advantages not available to other religious groups.

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. embassy officials maintained regular contact with the government and representatives of religious groups to discuss religious freedom.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The National Statistical Bureau of Iceland estimates the population is 319,600. Approximately 77 percent of the population belongs to the ELC. By year's end, 1,478 individuals had resigned from the church, while the church registered 322 new individuals other than infants. Many of those who resigned joined one of the organizationally and financially independent Lutheran Free Churches, representing 5.7 percent of the population. Although most citizens observe traditional Lutheran rituals for such events as baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals, most do not regularly attend Sunday services.

Approximately 6.7 percent of the population belongs to 35 small recognized and registered religious groups. The largest is the Roman Catholic Church with 10,455 members. Approximately 5.8 percent belongs to other or unspecified religious groups and 4.9 percent does not belong to any religious group. Muslim sources estimate there are 1,000 to 1,500 Muslims. There are fewer than 100 Jews. Foreigners constitute an estimated 80 percent of the Roman Catholic population, mostly from other European countries and the Philippines.

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

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

## ICELAND

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom. The constitution also provides all persons the right to form religious associations and to practice religion in accordance with personal beliefs. The constitution bans teachings or practices harmful to good morals or public order.

The official state religion is Lutheranism. The constitution establishes the ELC as the state church and grants it state support and protection. The state operates a network of Lutheran parish churches throughout the country, and the Lutheran bishop appoints state church ministers to these parishes. The state directly pays the salaries of the 149 ministers in the state church, who are considered public servants under the Ministry of the Interior (MOI). 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 morning and evening devotions.

The general penal code establishes fines and imprisonment of 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.

The law provides state subsidies to registered religious groups. All taxpayers 16 years of age and older must pay a church tax of approximately 8,412 Icelandic Krona (ISK) (\$65). Individuals may direct their church tax payments to any of the officially registered and recognized religious groups. Those persons who are not registered as belonging to a religious group, or who belong to one that is not registered and officially recognized, pay the equivalent of the church tax to the state treasury.

Religious groups apply to the MOI for recognition and registration. By law, a three-member panel consisting of a theologian, a lawyer, and a social scientist reviews applications. To register, a religious group 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 groups must submit an annual report to the MOI describing the group’s operations over the past year. The law also specifies that the leader of a religious group must be at least 25 years old and pay taxes in the country. Registered religious groups receive state subsidies based

## ICELAND

on membership numbers. The law places no restrictions or requirements on unregistered religious groups.

By law, parents control the religious affiliation of their children until the age of 16. Change in religious affiliation of children under age 16 requires the consent of both parents if 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 in the child's affiliation after the age of 12, and such changes require the child's signature. By law, children at birth have the same religious affiliation as their mothers, in the absence of specific instructions to the contrary from both parents or from the mother if the father does not claim paternal rights or is unknown.

Virtually all schools are public schools. By law, school grades one through ten (ages 6-15) must include instruction in community studies, which includes subjects such as Christianity, ethics, and theology. The law also mandates that "the Christian heritage of Icelandic culture, equality, responsibility, concern, tolerance, and respect for human value" shape general teaching practices. The compulsory curriculum for Christianity, ethics, and theology takes a multicultural approach to religious education and emphasizes teaching a variety of beliefs. Secondary schools teach theology under the community studies rubric along with sociology, philosophy, and history.

By law, the education minister may exempt pupils from instruction in compulsory subjects such as Christianity, ethics, and theology, and individual school authorities issue exemptions informally. School authorities need not offer other religious or secular instruction in place of these classes. Some observers note that this discourages students or their parents from requesting exemptions and potentially isolates students seeking exemptions or puts them at risk of bullying in schools.

The Reykjavik City Council prohibits religious groups from conducting any activities, including the distribution of proselytizing material, in the municipal public schools (grades one through ten) during school hours. Any student visits to the gathering places of religious groups during school hours are under the guidance of a teacher as part of a class on religion. Any such instruction cannot involve the active participation of students in a religious service.

## ICELAND

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.

### Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The government provided the state church approximately ISK 4.67 billion (\$36.3 million) during the year. The state church operated all cemeteries and all recognized religious groups had equal access to them. The church tax also provided ISK 262 million (\$2 million) to the other recognized religious groups.

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 came to the classroom and provided guidance on a variety of subjects.

In July Akureyri school officials fired a grade school teacher after parents of students complained about his personal blog in which he highlighted what he considered to be justification in the Bible for his anti-homosexual views. School authorities placed the teacher on administrative leave when the blog first became a point of contention. The mayor of Akureyri stated that the school dismissed the teacher based on job performance and not because of expression of religious beliefs. The teacher requested MOI review the matter to see whether his firing was justifiable. The ministry had not reached a conclusion in the matter by year's end. The teacher also filed a complaint with the teachers' union.

In April the Reykjavik City Planning Commission told the Association of Muslims in Iceland it had tentatively found a suitable plot of land for a mosque. At year's end, the city had not formally transferred the land due to bureaucratic delays. The application to build a mosque was originally filed in 2000. Other groups' applications for similar plots made swifter progress during that time. The building that a group of Muslim investors purchased in Reykjavik in 2010 to be used as an Islamic cultural center had not been put to use at the end of the year.

The MOI approved the registration of three religious organizations: The Reborn Christian Church of God, Iceland Christian Nation, and the Salvation Army Religious Organization. The MOI rejected the application of the Buddhist Association of the Diamond Way of the Karma Lineage because its core membership was too small and the application did not include sufficient

## ICELAND

information regarding the group's basic practices and operations. It rejected Zuism because its basic practices were not fully explained in the application. The MOI also rejected the Buddhist Meditation Society of Iceland because it was not a religious organization as defined in the law, but rather a society for meditation.

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

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. The country is a small, close-knit, homogenous society that closely guards its culture. Because ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked, it is difficult to categorize reported incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

In January police were unable to identify the person who buried the carcasses of several pigs, pig blood, and pig offal on the site planned for the Association of Muslims in Iceland's mosque. In an online debate following these events, a participant threatened an ethnic Icelandic Muslim woman with physical harm.

In June the organizer of the Facebook group "Protesting Against a Mosque in Iceland," which had approximately 1,500 members, distributed a flyer in the neighborhood of the site planned for the mosque. The flyer reportedly showed a bloody skull superimposed over the front of a mosque and claimed the planned mosque would foment terrorist activities and be a nuisance to the community.

In February Rabbi Abraham Cooper, writing on behalf of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, urged the Icelandic National Broadcasting Service (RUV) to discontinue its annual Lenten broadcast of the "Hymns of the Passion," a collection of 50 poetic texts on the passion of the Christ written by seventeenth-century Icelandic priest and poet Hallgrímur Petursson. The letter asserted that the poetic texts included a number of "blatantly anti-Semitic references" which would only serve to "reinforce hateful notions about Jews and poison new generations of impressionable young people with onerous stereotypes of Jewish cunning, treachery, and ... the toxic charge of deicide." In response, RUV Director General Pall Magnússon called the "harsh interpretation" of alleged anti-Semitic references in the hymns unjustified. Magnússon described the 350-year old hymns as a valued and cherished part of Iceland's cultural history and heritage and noted that the RUV would continue to broadcast them in a "suitable and relevant context."

The Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation continued to meet during the year. Representing major registered religious groups and open to any registered

## ICELAND

religious group, the forum's goal was to foster dialogue and strengthen links between religious groups and secular philosophical organizations. The government was a member of the Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation but did not sponsor programs.

The ELC designated a Japanese-born minister to serve immigrant communities and help recent arrivals of all religious groups integrate into society.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

U.S. embassy officials regularly discussed religious freedom with local leaders representing a broad spectrum of religious groups and nongovernmental organizations. In August the ambassador visited the Islamic Cultural Center of Iceland to meet with its leadership to discuss the members' plans and aspirations in Icelandic society. In August the embassy invited members of the Muslim community, along with state church officials and representatives of other religious groups, to the ambassador's residence for an iftar to celebrate Ramadan.