

# **IRELAND 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution, which also prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion. Based on a constitutional provision, the law makes blasphemy a punishable offense. The Convention on the Constitution voted to replace the blasphemy law with a new provision making incitement to religious hatred an offense. The government plans to hold a referendum on the change in 2015. In April a package containing a white substance and anti-Semitic material was mailed to then-Minister for Justice Alan Shatter.

There were reports of anti-Semitism, including after demonstrations protesting Israeli actions during the conflict in Gaza. Unknown individuals cut down a Christian cross located at the top of the country's highest mountain.

U.S. embassy officials met with the government to discuss discrimination and the integration of religious minorities into the community.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 4.8 million (July 2014 estimate). The most recent census (in 2011) indicates the population is approximately 84 percent Catholic, 3 percent Church of Ireland, 1 percent Muslim, 1 percent Orthodox Christian, and 1 percent unspecified Christian, with 6 percent not stating a religious affiliation. There are small numbers of Presbyterians and Jews. Groups of Christians and Muslims from sub-Saharan Africa, Muslims from North Africa and the Middle East, Muslims and Hindus from South Asia, and Orthodox Christians from Eastern Europe continue to grow, especially in larger urban areas.

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

### **Legal Framework**

Freedom of religion is guaranteed by the constitution. There is no state religion, and the constitution prohibits promotion of one religious group over another, as well as discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief. The law does not restrict the teaching or practice of any faith.

## **IRELAND**

The constitution makes blasphemy a punishable offense, although the last prosecution for blasphemy was in 1855. The law makes it an offense, punishable by a fine of up to 25,000 euros (\$30,400), to utter or publish material that is “grossly abusive or insulting in relation to matters held sacred by any religion,” when the intent and result are “outrage among a substantial number of the adherents of that religion.”

There is no legal requirement for religious groups to register with the government, nor is there any formal mechanism for government recognition of a religious group.

Under the constitution, the Department of Education provides equal funding to all public schools. Most public and private primary and secondary schools are religiously based. At the primary level, 90 percent of schools are Catholic, 6 percent Church of Ireland, 2 percent multidenominational, and 1 percent other religious groups. Schools’ boards of management are governed partially by trustees who are members of religious groups. By law, a religious school may select its staff based on their religious beliefs.

An Equality Tribunal, established under a law which specifies what constitutes discrimination, hears cases of reported discrimination. The tribunal may refer a case for mediation or investigate and decide the case itself. If the director of the Equality Tribunal finds that there has been discrimination, the tribunal will order compensation for the effects of the discrimination and/or order corrective action.

### **Government Practices**

In October the Convention on the Constitution voted to replace the blasphemy law with a new provision that would make incitement to religious hatred an offense. The government planned to hold a referendum on the change in 2015.

In April a package containing a white substance and anti-Semitic material was mailed to then-Minister for Justice Alan Shatter, who is Jewish. The Garda (national police) investigated the incident and found the white substance to be harmless. Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Enda Kenny labeled the incident a “new low.”

Several state agencies, including the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the Garda’s Racial and Intercultural Office (GRIO), enforced equality

## IRELAND

legislation and worked on behalf of minority religious groups. The GRIO established an official program to train Garda liaison officers who then met and engaged with immigrant communities and minority religious groups on a regular basis.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) renewed calls for the government to pass hate crime legislation after 47 incidents were recorded in the first half of the year under existing statutes. The groups said the country was the only Western democracy without specific hate crime legislation, leaving a “massive gap between the records and the reality” for minority groups. Based on Garda data, the Central Statistics Office (CSO) said there was one anti-Semitic case during the year. In 2013, two anti-Semitic cases were reported.

The government permitted, but did not require, religious instruction in public schools. Although religious instruction was an integral part of the curriculum of most schools, parents could exempt their children from such instruction. Publicly funded schools run by religious groups were permitted to refuse admission to a student not of that religious group if the school could prove the refusal was essential to the maintenance of the “ethos” of the school. There were no reports, however, of any children being refused admission to any school for this reason.

A multi-denominational group called Educate Together operated a network of 68 non-religious primary schools. It opened its first secondary schools during the year.

A school principal who punished a Church of Ireland student for not attending a first communion ceremony with his schoolmates at a local Catholic church was placed on administrative leave and later found guilty of religious discrimination by the Equality Tribunal. The chair of the school’s board of management and the school’s new principal made “an unreserved apology” to the student’s parents regarding the treatment of their son, according to the Equality Tribunal. The tribunal also ordered the school’s board of management to review its policies to ensure compliance with the law.

A January 28 ruling by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) held the government liable in a case where the principal of a state-funded Catholic school had abused a nine-year-old student in the 1970s. The minister of education was reviewing the decision to see how it might apply to similar cases. Media

## IRELAND

commentary said the ruling might force the government to re-examine some aspects of how predominantly religious-based schools were administered.

In August the Garda arrested a man in Dublin for painting anti-Semitic graffiti on a road in Lucan. He was later released, and the case was sent to the prosecutor's office to consider further action.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

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

In May a volunteer election worker reportedly made anti-Semitic remarks while canvassing in support of a Fine Gael candidate for a local election. Upon learning of the remarks, the candidate visited the victim and apologized. The volunteer was dismissed from the campaign team, and Fine Gael issued statements emphasizing its work against racism.

In August after an estimated 7000 individuals had marched in Dublin to protest Israeli actions during the conflict in Gaza, the media reported a statement by an Israeli diplomatic representative that some of the protesters, later amended to "only a small group" were "ignorant [and] anti-Semitic with an intensely rooted hatred of Jews."

In November unknown individuals cut down a Christian cross located at the top of the country's highest mountain, Carrauntoohil, near Killarney. The Garda started a criminal investigation into the vandalism, which was condemned by a variety of political and government figures. A new cross was subsequently erected in its place.

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

U.S. embassy officials met with the government to discuss issues related to integration of religious minorities into the community and discrimination against them. Embassy representatives also met with religious groups and NGOs to discuss how different religious groups are treated in Ireland and what issues these groups face in practicing their religion.