

FINLAND 2017 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination “without an acceptable reason,” and provides for the right to profess and practice a religion, to express one’s convictions, and to decline to be a member of a religious community. The law prohibits breaching the sanctity of religion, which includes blaspheming against God, defaming or desecrating to offend what a religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies. Religious communities must register to receive government funds. Jewish and Muslim community leaders continued to express concern about a law banning certain types of animal slaughter, including slaughter carried out in accordance with Jewish and Muslim traditions. Some politicians again made negative remarks against Muslims in social media. The Ministry of Education and Culture again awarded 80,000 euros (\$96,000) in grants to religious organizations to promote interfaith dialogue. In November a district court ruled in favor of a police proposal to ban the Nordic Resistance Movement (Vastarantaliike or PVL), widely characterized as neo-Nazi, and its activities. On September 6, Prime Minister Juha Sipilä and parliamentary party chairs issued a joint statement that condemned terrorism, violence, and hate speech related to religion.

Members of immigrant minority religious communities reported encountering societal discrimination, including in the workplace and when searching for employment. The nondiscrimination ombudsman’s office received 34 complaints of religious discrimination from January to June, compared with 23 cases during the same period in the previous year and 37 cases during all of 2016. The website *Magneettimedia* and the PVL continued to post anti-Semitic content online that advocated discrimination against persons based on their religion. The PVL made statements, particularly on its website, promoting discrimination or violence against persons based on their religion. The Finnish Ecumenical Council established a dialogue with the immigration service regarding best practices for interviewing Muslim asylum seekers who had recently converted to Christianity.

U.S. embassy staff met with various ministry officials to discuss government support for religious freedom and interfaith dialogue, religious instruction in schools, and the rights of conscientious objectors. Embassy staff also met with religious leaders from the Jewish and Muslim communities to discuss concerns about the law banning certain forms of animal slaughter and the government guidelines discouraging male circumcision. They also discussed the state of

religious freedom with these communities as well as with other religious minority groups, researchers, and the Finnish Ecumenical Council.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.5 million (July 2017 estimate). The government statistics office and the Ministry of Education and Culture estimate approximately 72 percent of the population belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELC), 1.1 percent to the Finnish Orthodox Church, and 25.3 percent do not identify as members of any religious group. Census results combine the other minority religious communities, including Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jews, and the Free Church of Finland, which together account for 1.6 percent of the population.

Although there are no accurate statistics, according to a 2016 estimate from the Ministry of Education and Culture, there are approximately 65,000 Muslims, of whom approximately 80 percent are Sunni and 20 percent Shia. With the exception of Tatars, most Muslims are immigrants or descendants of immigrants who arrived in recent decades from Somalia and North Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Balkans, Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution bars discrimination based on religion “without an acceptable reason.” It stipulates freedom of religion and conscience, including the right to profess and practice a religion, to express one's convictions, and to be a member or decline to be a member of a religious community. It states no one is under the obligation to participate in the practice of a religion. The law criminalizes the “breach of the sanctity of religion,” which includes blaspheming against God, publicly defaming or desecrating to offend something a religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies. Violators are subject to fines or imprisonment for up to six months. Authorities have rarely applied the law, most recently in 2009.

The law explicitly prohibits religious discrimination and prescribes a nondiscrimination ombudsman responsible for supervising compliance with the

law. The ombudsman investigates individual cases of discrimination and has the power to levy fines on violators, offers counseling and promotes conciliation, and lobbies for legislation, among other duties and authorities. Individuals alleging discrimination may alternatively pursue legal action through the National Non-Discrimination and Equality Tribunal or through the district court system. The decisions of the tribunal and the district court system may be appealed to the higher Administrative Court.

Individuals and groups may exist, associate, and practice their religion without registering with the government. In order to be eligible to apply for government funds, however, religious groups must register with the Patent and Registration Office as a religious community. To register as a community, a 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. A registered religious community is a legal entity that may employ persons, purchase property, and make legal claims. Nonprofit associations, including registered and unregistered religious groups, are generally exempt from taxes. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, there are approximately 130 registered religious communities, most of which have multiple congregations. Persons may belong to more than one religious community.

All citizens who belong to either the ELC or Orthodox Church pay a church tax, collected together with their income tax payments. Congregations collectively decide the church tax amount, now set at between 1 to 2 percent of member income. Those who do not want to pay the tax must terminate their ELC or Orthodox congregation membership. Members may terminate their membership by contacting the official congregation or the local government registration office, either electronically or in person. Local parishes have fiscal autonomy to decide how to use funding received from taxes levied on their members.

Registered religious communities other than the ELC and Orthodox Church are also eligible to apply for state funds. The law states registered religious communities that meet the statutory requirements (a minimum of 20 members and the ability to collect fees) may receive an annual subsidy from the government budget in proportion to the religious community's percentage of the population.

The ELC is required to maintain public cemeteries and account for the spending of government funds. Other religious communities and nonreligious foundations may maintain their own cemeteries. All registered religious communities may own and manage property and hire staff, including appointing clergy. The law authorizes the ELC and Orthodox Church to register births, marriages, and deaths for their

members in collaboration with the government Population Register Center. State registrars do this for other persons.

Parents may determine their child's religious affiliation if the child is under 12 years of age. The parents of a child between the ages of 12 and 17 must pursue specific administrative procedures with their religious community and the local population registration officials to change or terminate religious affiliation.

All public schools provide religious teaching in accordance with students' religion. All classes may include information about ethics and world religions. 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 religious community in question is registered, and the students' families belong to the religious community. Students who do not belong to a religious group or belong to a religious group for which special instruction is not available, may study ethics. Students age 18 or older may choose to study either the religious courses pertaining to their religion or ethics. If a student belongs to more than one religious community, the parents decide in which religious education course the student participates.

Religious education focuses on familiarizing students with their own religion, other religions, and general instruction in ethics. Although teachers of religion must have the required state-mandated training for religious instruction, the state appoints them and they are not required to belong to any religious community. The National Board of Education provides a series of textbooks about Orthodox and Lutheran Christianity, Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam, as well as a textbook on secular ethics.

The government allows conscientious objectors to choose alternative civilian service instead of compulsory military 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 sentenced to prison terms of up to 173 days, one-half of the 347 days of alternative civilian service. Regular military service ranges between 165 and 347 days.

The law bans certain types of animal slaughter, requiring that animals be stunned prior to slaughter or be killed and stunned simultaneously.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In March the National Police Board filed a suit against the PVL with the Pirkanmaa District Court. According to national broadcaster Yle, the police accused the PVL of being “violent and racist” and aimed to outlaw the group and ban it from demonstrating, recruiting, or disseminating material. Court proceedings began on August 29. On November 30, the court ruled in favor of the police. It was the first such court-ordered ban on an organization since the 1970s. The PVL appealed the ruling, and the appeal remained pending at year’s end.

The Helsinki police created a 10-person unit with a mandate specifically to address crimes that involved infringements of the right of individuals to practice their religion. Nationwide, municipal police departments designated and trained 42 officers to become anti-hate crime instructors, and the National Bureau of Investigation created five new positions to investigate hate speech online.

According to the Ministry of Defense, there were 38 objectors to both military and alternative civilian service during 2016, the most recent year for which complete statistics were available. The ministry did not indicate how many of these individuals objected to service for religious reasons.

Leaders of the Jewish and Muslim communities continued to raise concern about the long-standing ban against certain types of animal slaughter, which they said prevented them from killing the animals in a religiously prescribed manner. Because the animals could not be slaughtered in a religiously approved manner domestically, members of these communities imported meat at higher prices. Government officials stated a provision in the law allowing simultaneous stunning and slaughter of animals was meant to accommodate religious slaughter.

Ministry of Social Affairs and Health guidelines discouraged circumcision of males, including through dialogue with religious communities, and continued to withhold public healthcare funding for such procedures. In its guidelines, the ministry stated that nonmedical circumcision of boys should only be performed by licensed physicians, a child’s guardians should be informed of the risks and irreversibility of the procedure, and it should not be carried out on boys old enough to understand the procedure without their consent. There was no formal legislation prohibiting circumcision of boys and no criminal liability for individuals who did not follow the ministry’s guidelines. Religious communities, including members of Muslim and Jewish communities, expressed disagreement with the guidelines;

however, the ministry stated it had not received any protest from religious representatives regarding the requirement that only a licensed doctor perform circumcision.

There were at least two incidents in which politicians made discriminatory remarks aimed at Muslims on social media. In January a district court in Jyväskylä found Member of Parliament Teuvo Hakkarainen (from the opposition Finns Party) guilty of incitement of racial hatred for a post he wrote on Facebook in 2016 that stated, “All Muslims are not terrorists but all terrorists are Muslims.” The court ordered Hakkarainen to pay a 1,160 euro (\$1,400) fine and required him to remove the Facebook post. On multiple occasions, Juusi Halla-aho, Chair of the Finns Party, posted public comments on his Facebook profile criticizing Muslims in the country.

According to a September reporting by Yle, more than 400 (mostly Lutheran) priests signed a petition requesting the immigration service consult with them during the asylum application process regarding applicants who had converted to Christianity (Yle estimated in July that several hundred Muslim asylum seekers had converted to Christianity in “recent years”). The priests stated they feared asylum applicants who converted to Christianity while in the country could face persecution if returned to some majority-Muslim countries of origin. Additionally, media reports and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) raised concerns that some officials at the immigration service who conducted asylum interviews lacked adequate knowledge about the converts’ religions. The Finnish Ecumenical Council, an organization that described itself as aiming to promote unity among Christian denominations, established a dialogue with the Finnish Immigration Service on this issue, which it characterized as “constructive.”

News reporting and NGOs also stated there was a need for improved interpreting services for asylum seekers, particularly during interviews that included religious terminology. In response, the immigration service published press releases in June and July titled “How does converting to Christianity affect asylum applications?” and “Converting to Christianity will not automatically result in the granting of asylum.” The press releases highlighted the country’s commitment to freedom of religion and stated officials examined each asylum application individually.

The government again allocated 114 million euros (\$136.85 million) to the ELC and 2.5 million euros (\$3 million) to the Orthodox Church. The Ministry of Education and Culture allotted 524,000 euros (\$630,000) to 28 religious organizations for various projects.

In May the Ministry of Education and Culture awarded a total of 80,000 euros (\$96,000) to promote interfaith dialogue. Four organizations received funding for their projects: The National Forum for Cooperation of Religions in Finland (CORE); Filoksenia, an organization promoting cultural tolerance; Fokus, an interfaith and intercultural organization; and Ad Astra, a multicultural organization for youth.

Prime Minister Juha Sipilä and all of the parliamentary party chairs signed a joint statement on September 6 that condemned terrorism, hate speech, including speech motivated by discrimination against religion, and violence.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

From January through June (the latest period for which data were available), the nondiscrimination ombudsman's office received 34 complaints of religious discrimination, compared with 23 complaints during the same period in 2016. The number of complaints for all of 2016 was 37. According to a police report on hate crimes in 2016, police recorded 149 suspected hate crimes related to religion or belief – 14 percent of all hate crimes – compared with the 133 cases recorded a year earlier. Anti-Muslim sentiment accounted for slightly less than half of the 2016 incidents. In the announcement for the 2016 hate crime statistics, the report's authors stated the increase in hate speech incidents in 2016 might have been greater if the police had had more resources to address the rapid rise in hate speech online.

The PVL made statements promoting discrimination or violence against persons based on their religion and maintained an active online presence through its website and social media. The second priority of its political platform read, "With all means possible work towards reconquering power from the global Zionist elite." The PVL continued to post anti-Semitic content on its social media pages and published other online materials glorifying Adolf Hitler. The PVL wrote on its homepage *Vastarinta.com* it was "a news site that stands out and dares to challenge the old, often Jewish-owned and/or -controlled mass media empires." In April the site published the article "Who brought Muslims to Europe?" stating Jews brought Muslims to Europe and asserting that Finns must become informed about racial violence against white persons and diseases spread by Muslim immigrants. Based

on its social media posts, the group appeared to have organized small-scale training camps and rallies throughout the country. The PVL had local branches in Helsinki, Turku, Tampere, Pori, Jyväskylä, and Oulu, with an estimated 200 people taking part in its activities and events. In October 200 PVL members marched in the city of Tampere to protest a court case underway in which the prosecutor's office was seeking to outlaw the PVL as an organization that advocated violence. On Independence Day, December 6, the PVL again organized a march through Helsinki. With approximately 450-500 participants, the march was significantly larger than the PVL's 2016 Independence Day march, which attracted 150 participants.

The Soldiers of Odin maintained an active online presence, but the group's public activities were limited. According to local and international media reports, leaders of the Soldiers of Odin said they organized the group in response to a security threat posed by incoming asylum seekers. Reuters reported members of the group blamed "Islamist intruders" for an increase in crime and carried signs with slogans such as "Migrants not welcome." The group's Facebook page included language reading "No more [expletive] mosques." The Soldiers of Odin's main activities included voluntary street patrols.

Minority religious communities continued to report discrimination. According to Deputy Non-Discrimination Ombudsman Rainer Hiltunen, representatives of Muslim immigrant communities continued to report workplace discrimination, such as in hiring decisions. According to law enforcement officials, members of Muslim communities in Helsinki worried about becoming targets of racist or xenophobic attacks.

According to the European Union (EU) Agency for Fundamental Rights' Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey, 38 percent of 198 Muslims surveyed in the country, all of whom had sub-Saharan African backgrounds, believed religious discrimination was very or fairly widespread in the country. Thirteen percent said they believed they had experienced discrimination because of their religion in the previous five years. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. The same EU survey found 45 percent of Muslim respondents from sub-Saharan Africa in the country reported harassment due to their ethnic or immigrant background at least once in the previous year, the second-highest percentage among 15 EU countries surveyed. On the other hand, the Muslim respondents reported the highest sense of attachment to the country of (4.6 points out of five) of any of the 15 countries surveyed.

The website *Magneettimedia*, known for its anti-Semitic content, continued to post discriminatory statements online. In May and July it posted articles entitled “Zionist bank cartel damages Finnish mining industry” and “International drug trafficking in the hands of the Jewish elite” respectively. The former owner of *Magneettimedia*, Juha Karkkainen, continued to publish anti-Semitic editorials in the newspaper *KauppaSuomi*, a periodical available through his large chain of department stores. An editorial from April stated, “In the Finnish school system the most important ‘anti-racist’ authority has for decades been the Jew Karmela Liebkind. The primary source of Liebkind’s race theories is the ‘anthropologist’ Israel Ehrenburg [sic], who later in life changed his name to Ashley Montagu – a name attracting considerably less attention. The legacy of Israel Ehrenburg is eroding the Finnish education system not only through Karmela Liebkind but also through UNESCO.”

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy staff met with officials from the Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of Justice, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, parliament’s Human Rights Center, and the nondiscrimination ombudsman’s office to discuss the promotion of religious freedom. Embassy staff discussed religious intolerance, religious instruction in schools, the rights of conscientious objectors, and restrictions on ritual animal slaughter.

Embassy staff met with religious leaders, including representatives from the Jewish and Muslim communities, the Finnish Ecumenical Council, and other minority religious groups, as well as researchers focusing on religious communities, to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country. Topics discussed with members of the Jewish and Muslim communities included their shared concerns about the impact of the ban against certain types of animal slaughter on their religious practices and the government guidelines discouraging ritual male circumcision. Embassy staff also discussed anti-Muslim discrimination with members of the Muslim community.

Embassy staff posted on social media to highlight how the U.S. celebrated Religious Freedom Day on January 16.

The embassy hosted a video conference in May between high-level national police officials and U.S. law enforcement colleagues on effective community policing programs. Among the subjects covered were how to increase religious literacy

among officers and how to cope with xenophobic and other hate crimes, including those based on religion.