

# **FINLAND 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.

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

The U.S. embassy actively engaged religious and civic groups to promote religious freedom and tolerance through public programs, speakers, and events.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

According to Statistics Finland, the population is 5.4 million. Approximately 77 percent belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) and 1 percent to the Orthodox Church. Other religious groups, each accounting for less than 1 percent of the population, include Jehovah's Witnesses, Roman Catholics, Muslims, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Jews, and members of the Free Church of Finland.

There are approximately 50,000-60,000 Muslims, more than a 100 percent increase since 1999, primarily due to immigration and high birth rates. An estimated 75 percent are Sunni and 25 percent are Shiite. The largest Muslim group is ethnic Somali; there are also communities of North Africans, Bosnians, Arabs, Tartars, Turks, and Iraqis.

The government statistics agency reported in 2011 that the number of persons with no religious affiliation is over one million. An estimated 19 percent of the population either does not belong to any religious group or practices religion "in private," including nonregistered Pentecostal worshippers and Muslims.

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

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

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The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom, including the right to profess and practice religion and to express personal belief. Everyone has the right to belong, or to decline to belong, to a religious community. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion. The law criminalizes the breach of the sanctity of religion, prevention of worship, and breach of the sanctity of the grave.

The ELC and Orthodox Church are autonomous. The government has no legal authority to alter the content of proposals from their governing bodies and the president does not appoint bishops. Local parishes have economic independence as the current taxation system guarantees financial autonomy to the church. Members, civic organizations, and corporations are required to pay church taxes, with some exceptions. The ELC has the right to levy taxes from church members to fund youth programs, church staffing, and building maintenance. It also maintains the country's cemeteries.

All citizens who belong to either the ELC or the Orthodox Church pay a church tax set at 1 to 2 percent of income, varying by congregation, as part of their income tax. The church owns and manages its own property and labor arrangements. The church can register births, marriages, and deaths in collaboration with the Population Register Center, the national registry under ministry of finance purview. State registrars do this for other persons. Those who do not want to pay the tax must terminate their ELC or Orthodox congregation membership. Membership can be terminated by contacting the official congregation or the local government registration office. Church and municipal taxes help defray the cost of running the churches.

Parents may determine the religious affiliation of their children under 12 years of age. A child between the ages of 12 and 17 must express in writing his or her desire to change or terminate religious affiliation.

The law 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. There are currently 80 recognized religious groups, most of which have multiple congregations. The act allows persons to belong to more than one religious group.

All public schools provide religious teaching in accordance with the religion of the majority, as well as broader philosophical instruction; adult students (18 years of age) may choose to study either subject. Students who do not belong to any

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religion may choose either religious education or philosophical instruction. If a student belongs to more than one religious community, the parent decides in which religious education the student participates.

Registered religious communities other than the ELC and the Orthodox Church are also eligible to apply for state funds. Registration as a nonprofit religious community allows a community to form a legal entity that may employ persons, purchase property, and make legal claims. The law provides that registered religious communities that meet the statutory requirements (number of members and other income through donations) may receive an annual subsidy from the government budget in proportion to the religious group's percent of the population.

The government allows conscientious objectors to choose alternative civilian service; only Jehovah's Witnesses are specifically exempt from performing both military and alternative civilian service.

The government is a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and the Second Day of Christmas.

### Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Conscientious objectors other than Jehovah's Witnesses who refuse military or alternative civilian service may be imprisoned. In September Defense Minister Carl Haglund appointed a working group to review the exemption granted to Jehovah's Witnesses. The group was to assess whether the exception was still in line with equality laws. According to media reports the government has exempted some 100-200 Jehovah's Witnesses from military service each year.

Conscripts who refuse military or alternative service may be imprisoned. During the year six conscientious objectors were in prison, some of whom asserted their objection to performing compulsory military or civilian service was based on religious conviction. Conscientious objectors 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.

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The Helsinki District filed at least five cases of assault against parents due to the lack of legislation clarifying national law on religious male circumcision. A supreme court decision in 2008 found that in the absence of clear legal guidance, parents should not be prosecuted for assault if the circumcision was carried out according to the requisite medical standards and the person's "own interests as a religious community member."

On June 8, the Supreme Court confirmed the conviction of Jussi Halla-Aho, a Finns Party parliamentarian, for insulting Somalis and defaming Islam in blog entries in 2008. In addition to levying a 400 euro (\$532) fine, the court ordered him to remove the offending material from his blog. Halla-Aho resigned on June 20 from the chairmanship of parliament's Administration Committee, which oversees immigration, but he continued to serve as a member of the committee.

Helena Eronen, an assistant to Finns Party parliamentarian James Hirvisaari, wrote in a blog on March 11 that foreigners and other minorities should wear visible armbands so that police could more easily identify different minority groups. The blog entry was in response to wider public debate over personal searches conducted by police. Hirvisaari refused to fire Eronen, stating that the blog entry was satire and not a real proposal. In response the Finns Party parliamentary group temporarily suspended Hirvisaari from the parliamentary caucus. On August 13, Eronen announced her resignation.

The Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) provided an educational book *Salem--the Path of Islam* for the purpose of teaching about Islam at the elementary school level. The government has funded the preparation of a similar book for secondary level schools. The FNBE also provided a series of textbooks for nonreligious groups on ethics, as well as educational texts for Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish community members.

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

There were some reports of societal abuses of religious freedom or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Minority religious groups generally were not subject to discrimination.

Immigrants did not encounter difficulties in practicing their religious beliefs; however, they sometimes encountered discrimination and xenophobia. Because

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ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

On September 4, the magazine *Kaleva* reported that the Central Council of the Jewish Community asked the police to investigate an anti-Semitic article that appeared in a free supermarket newspaper published by Magneettimedia, a private advertising firm. The publication reached approximately 300,000 persons. The national broadcaster YLE reported that police investigated the matter and the prosecutor general was considering whether to press charges.

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

The U.S. embassy conducted events promoting religious freedom and tolerance. The deputy chief of mission participated in a panel discussion with religion and human rights scholars in August. Embassy staff met several times throughout the year with religious leaders to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country.