

ICELAND 2013 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 state financially supports and promotes Lutheranism as the country's official religion. As the national church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) has some advantages not available to other religious groups. In February the parliament amended the Law on Registered Religious Organizations to provide equal recognition and rights to secular organizations that promote humanism.

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 U.S. government estimates the total population at 315,000 (July 2013 estimate). Approximately 76 percent of the population belongs to the ELC. In 2012, 1,478 individuals 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 5.8 percent of the population.

Approximately 7.1 percent of the population belongs to 38 small recognized and registered religious and secular humanist groups. The largest of the small religious groups is the Roman Catholic Church with 10,949 members. Approximately 5.9 percent belong to other or unspecified religious and secular humanist groups, and 5.2 percent do not belong to any religious or secular humanist 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 Poland and other European countries, and the Philippines.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

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Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom. The constitution 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 national 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 ELC ministers to these parishes. The state directly pays the salaries of the 140 ministers in the national church, who are considered public servants under the Ministry of the Interior (MOI). State radio broadcasts Lutheran 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 establishes fines and up to two years imprisonment for verbal or physical assault on an individual or group based on religion.

The law provides state subsidies to registered religious groups. Taxpayers, 16 years of age and older, who belong to any one of the officially registered and recognized religious groups and secular humanist organizations pay an annual church tax payment of ISK 8,741 (\$76), to their respective group.

Religious groups and secular humanist organizations apply to the MOI for recognition and registration. By law, a four-member panel reviews the applications. The chairman of the panel is nominated by a university law faculty, and the other three members are nominated by the University of Iceland's Department of Social and Human Sciences, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, and Department of History and Philosophy, respectively. To register, a religious group must "practice a creed or religion" and a secular philosophical organization must "be based on secular views, operate in accordance with certain ethical values and personal development, and deal with ethics or epistemology in a prescribed manner." Both must also "be well established, be active and stable, not have a purpose that violates the law or is prejudicial to good morals or public order, and have a core group of members who participate in its operations and support the values of the organization in compliance with its teachings and pay church taxes in the country in accordance with the Law on Church Taxes." The

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organization, whether religious or secular, shall administer certain ceremonies, such as funerals, weddings, baptisms or naming ceremonies, and confirmations or other comparable ceremonies. All registered religious groups and secular humanist organizations 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 or a secular humanist organization must be at least 25 years old and pay church taxes. Registered religious groups and secular humanist organizations receive state subsidies based on membership numbers. The law places no restrictions or requirements on unregistered religious groups.

By law parents control the affiliation of their children to religious or secular humanist groups until the age of 16. Change in 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. The law 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.

Virtually all schools are public schools. By law, school grades one through 10 (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.

The Reykjavik City Council prohibits religious and secular humanist groups from conducting any activities, including the distribution of proselytizing material, in municipal kindergartens and public schools (grades one through 10) during school hours. Reykjavik city school administrators can invite the representatives of religious and secular philosophical groups to visit classes on religion or life skills as part of the compulsory curriculum. These visits must be under the guidance of a teacher and be in accordance with the curriculum. Any student visits to the

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gathering places of religious and secular humanist groups during school hours are under the guidance of a teacher as part of a class on religion.

Government Practices

The government provided the ELC approximately ISK 4.71 billion (\$40.9 million) during the year. The ELC operated all cemeteries and all recognized religious groups had equal access to them. The church tax also provided ISK 269 million (\$2.34 million) to the other recognized religious groups.

The towns of Gardabaer and Mosfellsbaer, in cooperation with the National 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.

At year's end, the MOI had not reached a conclusion in the case of the grade school teacher that Akureyri school officials had dismissed in 2012 after parents of students complained about his personal blog. In the blog, he highlighted what he considered to be justification in the Bible for his anti-homosexual views. The mayor of Akureyri stated in 2012 that the school dismissed the teacher based on his job performance and not because of his expression of his religious beliefs. The teacher had requested that the MOI review the matter to see whether his firing was justifiable.

Some observers note that the absence of replacement classes for students who were exempted from religious education classes discouraged students or their parents from requesting exemptions and potentially isolated students seeking exemptions or put them at risk of bullying in schools.

In October the Reykjavik City Council formally granted the Association of Muslims in Iceland a plot of land for a mosque. The application to build a mosque was originally filed in 2000. Other groups' applications for similar plots made swifter progress during that time. At the beginning of the year the Islamic Cultural Center of Iceland had started using the building that a group of Muslim investors purchased in Reykjavik in 2010 as an Islamic cultural center.

The MOI approved the registration of three religious and secular humanist organizations: Zuism, which had been rejected in 2012; Sidmennt – the Icelandic Ethical Humanist Association; and The Apostles Church Beth-Shekhinah.

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Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Because ethnicity and religion are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize reported incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

The Facebook group, “Protesting Against a Mosque in Iceland,” grew from roughly 1,500 members to approximately 3,200 members. Supporters of building a mosque in Reykjavik established a rival group during the year named “We Do not Protest Against a Mosque in Iceland,” which also had about 3,200 members.

In November four individuals placed several pig heads and spilled red paint on pages of the Quran and on the grass of the site planned for the Association of Muslims in Iceland’s mosque. One of the individuals, Oskar Bjarnason, confessed on a radio program to having participated in the act, calling it “a performance act” to protest against building a mosque on the site. Police were still investigating the case at the end of the year.

The Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation continued to meet during the year. Representing major registered religious groups and open to any registered 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 employed 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 embassy invited members of the Muslim community, along with ELC officials and representatives of other religious groups, to the Ambassador’s residence for an iftar. The Ambassador and his guests discussed the progress of the current state of religious freedom with regard to the Muslim community and progress toward procuring a plot of land from the city of Reykjavik to build a mosque.