

# **FINLAND 2014 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

There were no reports of government actions taken affecting the constitutional guarantees and protections for religious freedom. There was a public debate over religious community services and religious hymns in schools.

Members of minority religious communities sometimes encountered societal discrimination and xenophobia. There were efforts to overcome rifts within the Muslim community, including meetings between Helsinki law enforcement officials and various Muslim religious leaders. A bus company reversed its earlier decision that drivers could not wear turbans as part of their work attire, according to media reports.

Embassy staff met with government officials from the Ministries of Education and Justice, as well as Helsinki police officials to discuss religious freedom, including religious instruction in schools and the rights of conscientious objectors. Embassy staff also met with religious leaders, including representatives from Jewish and Muslim communities, to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country, including concerns by members of both communities about a long-standing ban against certain types of animal slaughter.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.3 million (July 2014 estimate). Approximately 75 percent of the population belongs to the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) and 1 percent to the Orthodox Church. Other religious communities, 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. The government statistics agency reported in 2013 that the number of persons with no religious affiliation is 1.2 million (approximately 22.6 percent of the population).

There are approximately 60,000 Muslims, of which an estimated 80 percent are Sunni and 20 percent are Shia. With the exception of Tatars, who arrived in Finland in the nineteenth century, most Muslim immigrants arrived in recent decades from Somalia and North Africa, Iraq, the Balkans, Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

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

#### Legal Framework

The constitution states “everyone has the freedom of religion and conscience.” According to the constitution, freedom of religion entails the right to profess and practice a religion, the right to express one’s convictions and the right to be a member of or decline to be a member of a religious community. It also states no one is under the obligation to participate in the practice of a religion. The law includes regulations on registered religious communities and religious education and ethics in public schools. The constitution and other laws prohibit discrimination based on religion. The law criminalizes the “breach of the sanctity of religion,” including prevention of worship, and disturbances of funeral ceremonies.

The law requires religious communities to register to be eligible to apply for government funds. To register, a religious community 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 100 recognized religious communities, most of which have multiple congregations. The law allows persons to belong to more than one religious community. Registration as a nonprofit religious community allows a community to form a legal entity that may employ persons, purchase property, and make legal claims.

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. These taxes are not levied on any other religious groups. Those who do not want to pay the tax must terminate their ELC or Orthodox congregation membership. Local parishes have fiscal autonomy to decide how to use funding received from taxes levied on their members. Membership can be terminated by contacting the official congregation or the local government registration office, which can now be done electronically as well as in person.

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 states registered religious communities which meet the statutory requirements (number of members and other

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income through donations) may receive an annual subsidy from the government budget in proportion to the religious community's percentage of the population. During the year, 200,000 euros (\$243,000) were allocated to 24 registered communities, amounting on average to 4-5 euros (\$5-6) per member. The government also granted separate funding for refurbishment projects for registered community premises.

The ELC and the Orthodox Church are required to maintain cemetery property and account for the spending of public funds on their employment of staff. Other religious communities may own and manage property and make their own labor arrangements, including appointing clergy. The law provides the ELC and the Orthodox Church the ability to register births, marriages, and deaths for their members in collaboration with the Population Register Center, the national registry under Ministry of Finance purview. State registrars do this for other persons.

Parents may determine the religious affiliation of their children less than 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.

All public schools provide religious teaching in accordance with the religion of the students. Students who do not belong to a religion study ethics. Adult students (18 years of age) may choose to study either subject. 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. If a student belongs to more than one religious community, the parent decides in which religious education course the student participates. Religious education focuses on familiarizing students with their own religion, other religions, and Finnish traditions of belief; it does not include religious worship. Although the teacher must have the required state-legislated and regulated training for religious instruction, the teacher does not have to belong to any religious community. The National Board of Education provides a series of textbooks about Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam, as well as a textbook on secular ethics.

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. Other conscientious objectors who refuse

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both military and alternative civilian service may be sentenced to imprisonment. Conscientious objectors serve prison terms of 173 days – the maximum legal sentence – which is equal to one-half of the 347 days of alternative civilian service. Regular military service varies between 165 and 347 days.

The law bans certain types of animal slaughter, requiring that animals be stunned prior to slaughter. The law does provide allowances for religious slaughter, but stipulates that these animals must be killed and stunned simultaneously.

### Government Practices

According to the Ministry of Justice, there were 18 objectors to both military and alternative civilian service from January 1 to September 1, and one of them was imprisoned. Seventeen objectors were allowed to serve their sentence at home but were required to wear electronic ankle monitors and follow a daily program approved as part of an individual enforcement plan. According to media reports, the government exempted 100-200 Jehovah's Witnesses from military service.

On January 28, the *Helsingin Sanomat* newspaper reported that the Central Finland court issued a fugitive arrest warrant for a neo-Nazi activist in absentia for a stabbing at an event discussing right-wing extremism. In March police contacted several members of the Jewish community about whom information was found on a flash drive in the activist's apartment. The police indicated they believed the suspect fled abroad.

There was a public debate about whether a traditional summer hymn with religious ELC overtones could be sung at end-of-school ceremonies. The Deputy Justice Chancellor on March 24 and the Constitutional Law Committee on April 25 determined the singing of traditional hymns at end-of-term celebrations in spring and before Christmas did not violate the legal restriction on not including worship in religious education, and these celebrations could therefore continue.

There was a public debate on whether community services such as counseling, burial services, and maintenance of cemeteries should remain free for non-members of the main two churches.

Leaders of the Jewish and Muslim communities expressed concern about a long-standing ban against certain types of animal slaughter. Because the animals could

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not be slaughtered in a religiously approved manner domestically, members of the community had to import meat at substantially higher prices.

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

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

There were no reports of members of minority religious communities encountering difficulties in the practice of their religious beliefs; however, they sometimes encountered discrimination and xenophobia. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it is difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity.

Representatives of various Muslim communities took part in meetings with Helsinki police and politicians on September 15-16 amid concerns over growing rifts among different Muslim communities. According to the leader of a local Shia group quoted by the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) in September, relations between Sunni and Shia Muslims had become strained. Paula Kemell, chair of the Helsinki-based Resalat Islamic Society, told YLE in September “extremist thinkers” were trying to foment dissent among Muslims in the country and that there had been arguments, smear campaigns, and even threats on social media and elsewhere online. The first meeting was organized by city police based on an initiative from members of the Muslim community.

On October 17, the Rovaniemi Court of Appeals upheld a 2013 district court decision finding Juha Karkkainen, the publisher of the *Magneettimedia* newspaper, guilty of inciting hatred against an ethnic group. The newspaper had translated and republished three anti-Semitic articles by two American and one Argentine author.

A settlement was reached on February 25 in a dispute over the head covering worn by a Sikh bus driver at work. According to media reports, the bus company in question reversed its earlier decision not to allow drivers to wear turbans as part of their work attire. National unions representing bus drivers and bus driver employers agreed that a turban could be part of a bus driver’s working attire.

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

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Embassy staff met with government officials from the Ministries of Education and Justice, as well as Helsinki police officials to discuss religious freedom, including religious instruction in schools and the rights of conscientious objectors. Embassy staff also met with various religious leaders, including representatives from the Jewish and Muslim communities, to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country, including concerns by members of both communities about a long-standing ban against certain types of animal slaughter.