

# FINLAND 2016 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, including blaspheming against God, defaming or desecrating for the purpose of offending what a religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies. Religious communities must register to receive government funds. The law bans certain types of animal slaughter, including slaughter carried out in accordance with Jewish and Muslim traditions. A new law concerning financial support for the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) and the Orthodox Church became effective on January 1. The Supreme Court issued two preliminary decisions allowing for male circumcision with some restrictions. Some politicians made negative remarks against Muslims in social media.

Between January and October, the government’s nondiscrimination ombudsman reviewed 38 cases involving religious discrimination, compared with 22 such cases in all of 2015. Police reported 133 suspected religiously-motivated hate crimes in 2015, the most recent year for which data were available, compared to 67 in 2014. The neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (Vastarantaliike, or PVL) and members of anti-immigrant group the Soldiers of Odin made statements supporting discrimination or violence against persons based on their religion. The government linked several violent crimes to PVL. Members of immigrant minority religious communities reported encountering societal discrimination. Muslim religious leaders and Helsinki law enforcement officials continued to meet. The interfaith National Forum for Cooperation of Religions published a statement reemphasizing its goals of preventing violent behavior, terrorism, and hate speech. The website *Magneettimedia* continued to post anti-Semitic content.

U.S. embassy staff met with government officials and law enforcement to discuss religious instruction in schools and the rights of conscientious objectors. Embassy staff met with religious leaders from the Jewish and Muslim communities, the Finnish Ecumenical Council, and Muslim youth groups to discuss the state of religious freedom, including Jewish and Muslim leaders’ concerns about a ban on certain forms of animal slaughter and government guidelines discouraging male circumcision.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.5 million (July 2016 estimate). The government statistics office and the Ministry of Education and Culture estimate approximately 73 percent of the population belongs to the ELC and 1 percent to the Finnish Orthodox Church. Other religious communities, each accounting for less than 1.6 percent of the population, include 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. The statistics office reported in 2015 there were 1.3 million people (approximately 23.5 percent of the population) with no religious affiliation.

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, 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," including blasphemy against God, publicly defaming or desecrating, for the purpose of offending, something a church or religious community holds sacred, and disturbing worship or funeral ceremonies. Violators are subject to fines or imprisonment for up to six months. The law is rarely invoked.

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 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 and is also governed by several provisions of law. As long as an association – including a registered religious community – does not generate a profit, it is generally exempt from paying taxes. According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, there are 100 recognized 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 the Orthodox Church pay a church tax set by each congregation at between 1 to 2 percent of income, 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. Membership may be terminated 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 the Orthodox Church are also eligible to apply for state funds. The law states 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 community's percentage of the population.

The ELC and the Orthodox Church are required to maintain cemeteries and account for the spending of public funds. All registered religious communities may own and manage property and hire staff, including appointing clergy. The law authorizes the ELC and the Orthodox Church to register births, marriages, and deaths for their members in collaboration with the government's Population Register Center. State registrars do this for other persons.

On January 1, a new law entered into force changing how the government disburses public funds to the ELC and the Orthodox Church. Both churches formerly received a percentage of state-collected corporate taxes (in addition to the church tax). Under the new law, the government budgets amounts for each church that may change from year to year.

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' religions. Students who do not belong to a religious group study ethics. Students 18 or older 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 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, they are appointed by the state and 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 that they be killed and stunned simultaneously.

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

### **Government Practices**

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 the provision allowing simultaneous stunning and slaughter of animals was meant to accommodate religious slaughter.

On March 31, the Supreme Court issued two preliminary decisions regarding male circumcision. The Court ruled that circumcision would not be considered an offense if it were in the child's best interest, both parents consented to the procedure, and the circumcision was performed with great attention to detail. In its rulings, the Supreme Court strongly criticized the lack of clear legal guidelines surrounding male circumcision.

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 non-medical circumcision of boys should only be performed by licensed physicians, that a child's guardians should be informed of the risks and irreversibility of the procedure, and that it should not be carried out on boys old enough to understand the procedure without their consent. Religious communities, including members of Muslim and Jewish communities, expressed disagreement with the guidelines and said they were having discussions about the issue with the government.

According to the Ministry of Justice, there were 52 objectors to both military and alternative civilian service during the year, 10 of whom were imprisoned. The ministry did not indicate how many of these individuals objected to service for religious reasons. Forty-two 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 and Ministry of Defense reports, the government exempted 100 to 150 Jehovah's Witnesses from military service.

The government allocated 114 million euros (\$120 million) to the ELC and 2.5 million euros (\$2.8 million) to the Orthodox Church during the year in place of the corporate tax revenue payments. The government allocated a total of 532,000 euros (\$560,600) among the 23 registered religious communities who applied for and received government funding (excluding the ELC and Orthodox Church), compared to 200,000 euros (\$210,800) allocated in 2015. Registered religious communities could apply for separate funding for refurbishment projects for

premises of registered religious communities, but the government granted no such funding during the year.

A government action plan to foster social inclusion entitled “Meaningful in Finland” included as one of its themes measures to strengthen interfaith dialogue through government grants. The Ministry of Education and Culture allocated approximately 80,000 euros (\$84,300) for other interfaith dialogue initiatives.

Muslim religious leaders and Helsinki law enforcement officials continued to meet in an ongoing dialogue to try to overcome rifts within the Muslim community, and to build trust between Muslim communities and law enforcement. Representatives of various religious communities, including the Muslim community, continued to engage in dialogue with government authorities on ways to counter violent extremism as part of preventive policing efforts.

On May 21, at a Ministry for Foreign Affairs-hosted religious freedom seminar, Foreign Minister Timo Soini highlighted his concern about “increasing instances of religious intolerance, discrimination, and violence in many countries.” He called on governments and religious leaders to counter the trend by protecting religious minorities and continuing to promote religious freedom and understanding between communities.

There were incidents in which politicians made discriminatory remarks on social media aimed at Muslims. On July 19, Finns Party youth leader Sebastian Tynkkynen wrote on his Facebook account that the state must stop a “phenomenon of Islamification,” stating that the “fewer Muslims we have, the safer.” He added that “Islam needs to be ripped out of Finland,” and that although the state may not limit freedom of speech, it should “start up the reverse vending machine at full swing and empty Finland of those people who have no reason to be in our country.” On August 8, following a complaint from a member of the public, police in Oulu started a preliminary investigation into whether Tynkkynen incited racial hatred on social media. Tynkkynen resigned as Finns Party youth leader on July 12. On November 11, public broadcaster YLE reported that a deputy state prosecutor charged Tynkkynen with incitement of ethnic and religious hatred, and “breaching religious peace.”

On March 21, YLE reported the chair of the Tampere Finns Party chapter and Tampere city council member Terhi Kiemunki wrote a Facebook post after seeing children dressed in hijabs participating in an Easter event, stating “Is this some kind of integration [program] where Muslim children go around giving Easter

blessings? Or does Allah also have some kind of anniversary today?” After being criticized for her comments, Kiemunki issued an apology on Facebook and requested a police investigation into whether her original Facebook post violated the law.

On September 27, Minister of the Interior Paula Risikko hosted a meeting for representatives of Christian, Jewish, and Shia and Sunni Muslim groups to “promote peaceful coexistence.” The groups signed a joint declaration to combat hate speech and advance cooperation.

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

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

Between January and October, the nondiscrimination ombudsman reviewed 38 religious discrimination cases, compared with 22 cases in all of 2015. According to a police report on hate crimes released in October, in 2015, the most recent year for which data were available, police recorded 133 suspected hate crimes related to religion or beliefs, compared to the 67 cases recorded a year earlier. Slightly more than half of the 2016 incidents (71 cases) were related to anti-Islamic sentiment or were between members of different Muslim groups. Crimes targeting religion or beliefs comprised 10.6 percent of all hate crimes recorded by police in 2015.

A November 2015 MOI report identified the PVL, a branch of a larger Nordic movement, as a right-wing extremist group. PVL had local branches in Helsinki, Turku, Tampere, Pori, Jyväskylä, and Oulu, with an estimated 60 people taking part in its activities and events.

On September 16, a 28-year-old man died after suffering head injuries following an altercation with a member of PVL at the group’s September 10 protest in downtown Helsinki. On December 30, national broadcaster YLE reported that the Helsinki District Court convicted PVL member Jesse Tornainen of aggravated assault and sentenced him to two years in prison. The prosecution sought a five and one-half-year to six-year sentence, and the prosecutor told YLE she planned to appeal the verdict. According to YLE, the lead investigator for the case said Tornainen was a founding member of PVL.

PVL made statements supporting discrimination or violence against persons based on their religion. PVL wrote on its homepage, *Vastarinta.com*, that it is “a news

site that stands out and dares to challenge the old, often Jewish-owned and/or -controlled mass media empires.” On January 30, PVL’s website also posted a story about “educating people against lies and false stories on [the] Holocaust.”

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. By January the group had expanded to different cities within the country as well as to other countries. In February group members organized a march in Tampere that attracted 150 people.

Minority religious communities continued to report discrimination. For example, representatives of Muslim immigrant communities continued to report workplace discrimination such as in hiring decisions. Because religion and ethnicity are often closely linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents as being solely based on religious identity. Between October 2015 and March 2016, the Finnish Somali League, an umbrella organization for Somali associations in the country, surveyed 105 people of Somali origin in the country’s largest metropolitan areas about the prevalence of discrimination. Of 85 percent of respondents who answered a question specifically about religious discrimination, 65 percent reported that they had experienced discrimination based on religion. Another 32 percent of respondents who had applied for a job in the past 12 months, said they experienced some form of discrimination (not specifically religious) during the application process.

The National Forum for Cooperation of Religions, an interfaith organization consisting of members from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities, published a statement on March 24 reemphasizing its goals of preventing violent behavior, terrorism, and hate speech. According to the Forum, the statement was intended to further the group’s overarching goal of strengthening religious freedom by promoting interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

The website *Magneettimedia*, known for its anti-Semitic content, continued to post discriminatory statements online. On September 24, the *Ilta-lehti* newspaper reported that PVL member Tornainen chaired the Pohjoinen Perinne (Northern Heritage) Association, which *Magneettimedia* cited on its website as its publisher. The *Magneettimedia* website had approximately 3,200 likes on its Facebook page.



In July it posted an article titled “Nelson Mandela – Terrorist: Who is Nelson Mandela, Nobel Prize laureate who cooperated closely with Jews.”

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

U.S. embassy staff continued to meet with officials from the Ministry of Education and Culture, Ministry of Justice, Parliament’s Human Rights Center, as well as Helsinki police officials, to discuss their policies towards religious freedom issues, including religious intolerance, religious instruction in schools, the rights of conscientious objectors, and restrictions on animal slaughter.

Embassy staff also met with various religious leaders, including representatives from the Jewish and Muslim communities, the Finnish Ecumenical Council, and Islamic youth groups, to discuss the state of religious freedom in the country, including concerns by members of the Jewish and Muslim communities about the impact of the ban against certain types of animal slaughter on their religious practices, and guidelines that discourage male circumcision.