

ICELAND 2018 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of religious belief and practice, as long as it is not prejudicial to good morals or public order, and protects the right to form religious associations. It names the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) as the state church, which the government provided with financial support and benefits not available to other religious groups, including treating ELC ministers as civil servants. Other religious and “life-stance” groups must register to receive state subsidies. Parliament enacted laws barring discrimination, including on the basis of religion, in the workplace and elsewhere.

The national police commissioner cited four reports of religious hate crimes during 2017, three against Islam and one against another, unnamed religion. Jehovah’s Witnesses reported an attack on a Kingdom Hall and a house belonging to one of its leaders during the year. Police were investigating both incidents at year’s end.

U.S. embassy officials met with representatives from the Ministries of Justice (MOJ) and Foreign Affairs (MFA), members of parliament, and the local authority responsible for registering religious groups to discuss the status and rights of religious groups, including to voice concerns about a bill, which parliament later failed to pass, to ban male circumcision. Embassy officials also maintained contact with representatives of religious groups and life-stance organizations to discuss their views on religious tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and the role of religious groups in education and refugee integration.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 344,000 (July 2018 estimate). According to 2018 estimates from the Icelandic statistical institute, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland comprises 67.2 percent of the population; Roman Catholics 3.9 percent; the Free Lutheran Church in Reykjavik 2.8 percent; the Free Lutheran Church in Hafnarfjordur 2.0 percent; the Asatruarfelagid 1.2 percent; non-Christian, life-stance, and other Christian groups 5.1 percent; other or unspecified groups 11.3 percent; and persons not belonging to any religious group 6.9 percent. The Association of Muslims in Iceland estimates there are 1,000 to 1,500 Muslims, primarily of immigrant origin from Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere. The Jewish community reports there are approximately 100 Jews.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution establishes the ELC as the national church and stipulates the government shall support and protect it. The constitution states all individuals have the right to form religious associations and practice religion in accordance with their personal beliefs, as long as nothing is “preached or practiced which is prejudicial to good morals or public order.” It stipulates everyone has the right to remain outside religious associations and no one shall be required to pay personal dues to any religious association of which he or she is not a member. The constitution also specifies individuals may not lose their civil or national rights and may not refuse to perform civic duties on religious grounds. The constitution bans only religious teachings or practices harmful to good morals or the public order. The law further specifies the right of individuals to choose or change their religion.

The law grants the ELC official legal status, and the government directly funds it from the state budget. The state treats the ELC bishop, vice bishop, and 135 other ELC ministers as civil servants under the MOJ and pays their salaries and retirement benefits as well as the operating costs of the bishop’s office. The ELC also receives indirect funding from church taxes, as do other registered religious and life-stance groups.

The penal code establishes fines of no specified amount and up to two years’ imprisonment for hate speech, including mocking, defaming, denigrating, or threatening an individual or group by comments, pictures, or symbols based on religion.

Religious groups, other than the ELC, and life-stance organizations may apply for recognition and registration to a district commissioner’s office (at present, designated as the district commissioner of Northeast Iceland), who forwards the application to a four-member panel that the minister of justice appoints by law to review applications. The University of Iceland faculty of law nominates the chairman of the panel, and the university’s Departments of Social and Human Sciences, Theology and Religious Studies, and History and Philosophy, respectively, nominate the other three members. The district commissioner then approves or rejects the application in accordance with the panel’s decision. Applicants may appeal rejections to the MOJ, resubmitting their application to the district commissioner with additional information. The same four-member panel reviews appeals.

To register, a religious group must “practice a creed or religion” and a life-stance organization must operate in accordance with certain ethical values, and

“deal with ethics or epistemology in a prescribed manner.” The law does not define “certain ethical values” or the prescribed manner in which groups must deal with ethics or epistemology. Religious groups and life-stance organizations 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, support the values of the organization in compliance with the teachings it was founded on, and pay church taxes in accordance with the law on church taxes.” The law does not define “well established” or “active and stable.”

According to the district commissioner’s office of Northeast Iceland, any unregistered religious group or organization may work in the same way as any company or association, provided it has, as these other organizations do, a social security number. Unregistered religious groups may, for example, open bank accounts and own real estate. They are free to worship and practice their beliefs without restriction, as long as their activities do not cause a public disturbance, incite discrimination, or otherwise conflict with the law.

Unregistered groups may also apply to join the Interfaith Forum (although none has done so), an interfaith group of religious and life-stance groups that meets bimonthly to discuss religious matters affecting the Icelandic community, but registered groups are automatically eligible to join. Religious ceremonies carried out by religious groups, such as marriages, are not legally recognized unless the group is registered. Unregistered groups are not eligible to receive state funds.

The law specifies the leader of a registered religious group or a life-stance organization must be at least 25 years of age and fulfill the general requirements for holding a public position. These include being physically and mentally healthy and financially independent, not having been sentenced for a criminal offense as a civil servant, and possessing the general and specialized education legally required for the position. Unlike the requirements for most public positions, the religious or life-stance group leader need not be a citizen, but he or she must have legal domicile in the country. All registered religious groups and life-stance organizations must submit an annual report to a district commissioner’s office (currently the district commissioner’s office of Northeast Iceland) describing the group’s operations during the previous year. Registered religious groups and life-stance organizations are required to perform state-sanctioned functions such as marriages and the official naming of children and preside over other ceremonies such as funerals.

The law provides state subsidies to registered religious groups and life-stance organizations. For each individual 16 years of age or older who belongs to any of the officially registered and recognized religious groups or life-stance

organizations, the government allocates an annual payment of 11,040 kronur (\$95) out of income taxes, called the “church tax,” to the individual’s respective, registered organization. The government allocates the payment regardless of whether the individual pays any income tax.

Persons who are not members of registered organizations are still required to pay the church tax, but the government retains their contributions rather than allocating them to religious or life-stance organizations.

By law, a child’s affiliation or nonaffiliation with a registered religious or life-stance group is as follows: (1) if the parents are married or in registered cohabitation and both belong to either the same registered organization or no organization, then the child’s affiliation shall be the same as its parents; (2) if the parents are married or in registered cohabitation, but have different affiliations or if one parent is nonaffiliated, then the parents shall make a joint decision on what organization, if any, the child should be affiliated with, and until the parents make this decision, the child shall remain nonaffiliated; (3) if the parents are not married or in registered cohabitation when the child is born, the child shall be affiliated with the same registered organization, if any, as the parent who has custody over the child. Change in affiliation of children younger than age 16 requires the consent of both parents if both have custody; if only one parent has custody, the consent of the noncustodial parent is not required. The law requires parents to consult their children about any changes in the child’s affiliation between ages 12 and 16. After turning 16, children may choose affiliation on their own.

By law, schools must operate in such a manner as to prevent discrimination on the basis of religion. Grades one through 10 (ages six to 15) in public and private schools must provide instruction, by regular teaching staff, in social studies, which includes Christianity, ethics, and theology. The law specifies the curriculum for these classes must adopt a multicultural approach to religious education, encompassing a variety of beliefs. Christian theology is included, as well as some content on other world religions. The law also mandates that “the Christian heritage of Icelandic culture, equality, responsibility, concern, tolerance, and respect for human value” shape general teaching practices.

Parents wishing to exempt pupils from compulsory instruction in Christianity, ethics, and theology must submit a written application to the school principal. The principal may request additional information, if necessary. The principal then registers the application as a “special case” and writes an official response to the parents, accepting or denying the request. School authorities are not required to offer other religious or secular instruction in place of these classes.

Of the 12 largest municipalities in the country, eight have adopted guidelines or rules governing the interaction between public schools and religious/life-stance groups. The Reykjavik City Council prohibits religious and life-stance groups from conducting any activities, including the distribution of proselytizing material, in municipal preschools and compulsory schools (grades one through 10) during school hours or during afterschool programs. Reykjavik school administrators, however, may invite the representatives of religious and life-stance groups to visit the compulsory classes on Christianity, ethics, and theology, and on life skills. These visits must be under the guidance of a teacher and in accordance with the curriculum. Any student visits to the gathering places of religious and life-stance groups during school hours must be under the guidance of a teacher as part of a class on religion and life-stance views. During such classes or visits, students may only observe rituals, not participate in them. The municipality of Hafnarfjordur has similar rules governing the interaction between schools and religious/life-stance organizations. The other six municipalities have either adopted or adapted guidelines on these interactions that the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture has set. The ministry's guidelines are broadly similar to those of Reykjavik and Hafnarfjordur.

Private schools must follow the same curriculum as public schools, including the Christianity, ethics, and theology taught in social studies classes. Private schools are free, however, to offer additional classes not in the public school curriculum, including classes in specific religious faiths.

In April parliament enacted legislation including protections against discrimination in the workplace for religious and other beliefs. In June parliament approved legislation prohibiting all forms of discrimination, including that based on religion, in all fields of society, excluding the labor market, which the previous legislation covers. The prohibitions against religious discrimination in both laws came into effect on July 1. The Center for Gender Equality monitors implementation. Complaints are submitted to the Gender Equality Complaints Committee, and violations may be punishable by fines unless heavier penalties are prescribed in other statutes.

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

Government Practices

In February members of parties from both the ruling coalition as well as the opposition cosponsored a bill in parliament to ban male circumcision on the basis of a child's right to choose. Local and international Muslim, Jewish,

Christian, and religious freedom groups called for parliament to reject or revise the bill in order to take religious freedom considerations into account, for example, by adding exceptions for religious practice under medical supervision. Parliament did not vote on the bill before the end of its parliamentary session in June, effectively dropping it from the parliamentary agenda. Bill proponents did not reintroduce the bill after parliament reconvened in September.

According to the MOJ, in 2017, the latest year for which data were available, the government provided the ELC with approximately 6.2 billion kronur (\$53.4 million), consisting of direct subsidies from the state budget as well as indirect funding from church taxes. The church tax also provided a total of 435 million kronur (\$3.75 million) to the other 47 recognized religious and life-stance groups.

The ELC continued to operate all cemeteries, and all religious and life-stance groups had equal access to them. At least one cemetery had a special area designated for burials of Muslims and persons of other faiths.

The ELC and the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the public University of Iceland continued to train theology students for positions within the ELC.

State radio continued to broadcast Lutheran worship services every Sunday morning as well as a Lutheran daily morning devotion.

The government continued to require individuals applying for a passport to present proof of religion from a religious organization if they wished to receive a religious exemption allowing them to wear a head covering for their passport photographs.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

According to the MOJ, there were four reports of religious hate crimes during 2017, the most recent year for which official data was available, three against Muslims and one against members of another, unnamed religion. Jehovah's Witnesses reported being targeted in several crimes. In May unidentified individuals threw a Molotov cocktail at the residence of a Jehovah's Witnesses leader in Reykjavik but caused no serious damage. In June a person or persons broke the window of a Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall and set a fire that caused some property damage. Police were investigating the incidents but had not identified any suspects by year's end.

A Gallup Iceland poll, conducted from September 20 to October 2 and released

on October 23, found public trust in the ELC declined to 33 percent, compared with 43 percent in 2017. The poll also found 54 percent of citizens supported separating church and state, compared with a peak of 61 percent supporting separation in 2010.

The first resident rabbi, representing the Chabad-Lubovitch community, arrived in the country in August to establish the country's first Jewish organization and apply for its registration.

The Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation, whose membership consisted of registered religious groups – including the ELC, Protestant, Catholic, and other Christian groups, Muslims, and Buddhists – continued to meet regularly, including during the spring parliamentary session to hold an interfaith discussion on the proposed bill to prohibit male circumcision. Although the Jewish community was not a member of the forum, individual Jewish representatives also attended the discussion on the draft circumcision bill. Representatives both for the proposed bill (including some religious representatives, medical community members, and secular children's rights representatives) and against it (including Muslim, Jewish, and Christian representatives) had the opportunity to present their views during the forum's discussion.

In some cases, ELC ministers and parishes, on a voluntary basis, served immigrant communities and helped recent arrivals of all religious groups integrate into society. Other religious groups were also free to serve immigrant communities on an informal and voluntary basis. The Islamic Foundation of Iceland organized community information and integration programs for Muslim migrants with representatives from local government and legal offices on such issues as voting and women's rights in the country.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

U.S. embassy officials met with representatives from the MOJ, MFA, and the district commissioner's office of Northeast Iceland to discuss the roles of religious equality and religious tolerance in the country. Specific topics included the status and rights of religious groups in the country, U.S. concerns about the proposed circumcision ban bill, which parliament later allowed to lapse, the incidence of religiously motivated hate crimes, and the prosecution of those crimes.

Embassy officials established contact with leaders of several religious groups, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, Soka Gakkai in Iceland, Buddisfafelag Islands, the Baha'i Center in Iceland, and the Jewish community. Embassy

officials continued to meet with representatives of the ELC, the Islamic Foundation of Iceland, the life-stance organization Sidmennt, and the Norse pagan association Asatruarfelagid, to discuss such issues as their relations with the government, religious tolerance, the extent of their involvement in interfaith dialogue, their views on the proposed circumcision ban bill, and the role of religious groups in education and refugee resettlement.