

ICELAND 2021 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. The constitution also protects the right to form religious associations. It names the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) as the state church, to which the government provided financial support and benefits not available to other religious groups. An agreement between church and state removed ELC clergy and staff from civil service status in 2020, and in June the government passed a comprehensive law designating the ELC as the chief authority on the allocation of its finances and internal structure and designating the ELC Assembly as its governing body. The government allows other spiritual and humanist groups (“life-stance groups” under the law) to register to receive state subsidies. The government registered two new religious groups – the Chabad Jewish Community and Wat Phra Buddhism – during the year, bringing the number of registered groups to 54. The Atheist organization Sidmennt criticized the government for insufficient consultations in developing government policy on religious matters. The government church tax payment to registered religious and life-stance groups was 11,820 kronur (\$91) for each member aged 16 or older, compared with 11,700 kronur (\$90) in 2020.

Religious groups reported generally good relations with the government and society at large. Jewish community leaders noted a slight uptick in antisemitic rhetoric on social media, and one incident involving a verbal confrontation at the time of violence between Israel and Gaza-based Hamas in May. According to a February Gallup poll, 32 percent of the public expressed trust in the ELC, compared with 31 percent in 2020, but down from 41 percent in 2009 and 61 percent in 1999. One Muslim community leader stated he had received reports of doctors being reluctant to perform circumcisions except for medical reasons.

U.S. embassy officials met with representatives from the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), Registers Iceland, and the district commissioner office (the local authority responsible for registering religious groups) to discuss the status and rights of religious groups. Embassy officials also maintained contact with representatives of religious groups and life-stance organizations to discuss their perspectives on religious tolerance, interfaith dialogue, and the role of religious groups in education and refugee integration. In January, the Ambassador hosted religious leaders from the ELC, Catholic Church, Islamic Foundation of Iceland, and Chabad Jewish Community for a roundtable discussion on religious freedom. The Charge d’Affaires delivered remarks at an April event marking Holocaust Remembrance Day. The embassy used social media

throughout the year to highlight the importance of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 354,000 (midyear 2021). According to January figures from Statistics Iceland, members of the ELC make up 62.3 percent of the population; persons not belonging to any religious group, 7.6 percent; Roman Catholic Church, 4.0 percent; Free Lutheran Church in Reykjavik, 2.7 percent; Free Lutheran Church in Hafnarfjordur, 2.0 percent; Asatruarfelagid (Icelandic paganism), 1.4 percent; Icelandic Ethical Humanist (Sidmennt) 1.1 percent; and other Christian, non-Christian, and “life-stance” groups, 15.0 percent. The Association of Muslims in Iceland estimates there are approximately 3,000 resident Muslims, primarily of immigrant origin. The Jewish community reports there are approximately 300 resident 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 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. Under the 2019 subsidiary agreement between the government and the ELC, which entered into force on January 1, 2020, the ELC Bishop, Vice Bishop, and other ELC ministers and general staff no longer have civil service status and are no longer paid directly by the government. The Church pays salaries, benefits, and operating costs out of its own budget, which comes from an annual government lump-sum payment. The ELC also receives funding from government-levied church taxes, as do other registered religious and life-stance groups.

The government passed in June a new law formally codifying outstanding

issues from the 2019 subsidiary agreement between the ELC and the state. The act designates the ELC as the chief authority on the allocation of its finances and internal structure and designates the ELC Assembly as its governing body. The act builds upon amendments passed by parliament in June 2020 that replaced multiple ELC funding streams with a lump-sum contribution and ended government subsidies for funeral services provided by religious and secular groups, including the ELC.

The penal code establishes fines of no specified amount and up to two years' imprisonment for hate speech, including mocking, defaming, denigrating, or threatening a person or group based on religion by comments, pictures, or symbols, or disseminating materials that do so.

Religious groups other than the ELC and life-stance organizations may apply for recognition and registration. Only registered groups are eligible for state funding and entitled to legal recognition of religious ceremonies, such as marriages, that they perform. Groups apply for recognition to the district commissioner's office that covers the administration of religion on a national level (currently the district commissioner of Northeast Iceland), which forwards the application to a four-member panel that by law the Minister of Justice appoints 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, which covers the administration of religion on a national level, any unregistered

religious group or organization may work in the same way as any company or association, provided it has, as the other organizations do, a social security number. Unregistered religious groups may, for example, open bank accounts and own real estate. Members 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.

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, a religious or life-stance group leader need not be a citizen but 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 from income taxes, called the "church tax," to the individual's respective registered organization. The per capita payment amount varies every year according to the annual budget bill. The government allocates the payment regardless of whether the individual pays any income tax. The government registrar's office ("Registers Iceland"), which describes itself on its website as the government office that maintains records of basic information on everyone who is or has been domiciled in the country as well as citizens residing abroad, maintains a tally of the number of members of each registered group, records the religious affiliation or nonaffiliation of each citizen at birth, and adjusts the information if individuals report a change.

Persons who are not members of a registered organization are still required to pay the church tax, but the government retains their contributions as general revenue 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 determined 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 which 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. A change in affiliation of children younger than 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 regarding any changes in the child's affiliation between the ages of 12 and 16. After turning 16, children may choose affiliation on their own.

In January, amendments to the Gender Autonomy Act entered into force concerning permanent changes to the gender characteristics (defined in the act as "biological factors related to gender, such as sex chromosomes, hormonal functions, gonads, and genitalia") of children under the age of 16. Consistent with standard legislative practice, parliament published supporting justification and elaboration of the amendments that stated, in part, "Foreskin procedures in instances where the foreskin is typical and where such procedures may be performed or planned for religious or cultural reasons fall outside the scope of the bill and therefore the provisions in the bill have no effect on whether such procedures are performed or permitted."

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 as well as some content on other world religions. The law specifies the curriculum for these classes must adopt a multicultural approach to religious education, encompassing a variety of beliefs. 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. 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 and 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, may, however, invite the representatives of religious and life-stance groups to visit compulsory classes on Christianity, ethics, theology, and 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 or life-stance organizations. The municipalities of Kopavogur, Gardabaer, Mosfellsbaer, Arborg, Fjardarbyggd, and Seltjarnarnes 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 curriculum 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.

The law prohibits all forms of discrimination in all fields of society, including those based on religious beliefs. The Equality Complaints Committee reviews complaints and issues fines in cases of violations unless other applicable statutes specify more severe penalties.

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

Government Practices

The government approved the registration of the Chabad Jewish Community and Wat Phra Buddhism during the year, bringing the number of registered groups to 54.

Officials from the Interfaith Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation had previously noted some issues in the dealings between registered religious organizations and the government registrar's office. In 2019, the registrar had restricted religious organizations' access to membership lists, citing the

implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation as the reason, but later overturned that decision. Officials from the government registrar's office confirmed that religious groups would have access to the government's membership tallies upon filing appropriate forms and paying required processing fees. Some religious groups complained about having to pay the fee and that individual member registrations were only electronic. Officials from Registers Iceland confirmed, however, that paper applications would be accepted and processed.

The Atheist organization Sidmennt criticized the government for a lack of consultation in developing government policy on religious matters. The organization described the government's policy as principally focused on creating a legal framework for the ELC, and other religious groups being afterthoughts.

The government church tax payment to registered religious and life-stance groups was 11,820 kronur (\$91) for each member, age 16 or older, compared with 11,700 kronur (\$90) in 2020.

According to the official state budget bill, in 2020, the latest year for which data were available, the government allocated approximately 7.6 billion kronur (\$58.47 million) to religious affairs, of which 3.7 billion kronur (\$28.47 million) was in direct subsidies to the ELC and an additional 2.7 billion kronur (\$20.77 million) was distributed through the church tax. The other 50 religious and life-stance groups recognized in 2020 received a total of 549 million kronur (\$4.22 million) in church tax distributions. In 2019, the government allocated approximately 7.3 billion kronur (\$56.16 million) to religious affairs, of which 4.8 billion kronur (\$36.93 million) was in direct subsidies to the ELC and an additional 2 billion kronur (\$15.39 million) was in church tax distributions. The other recognized religious and life-stance groups received a total of 468 million kronur (\$3.6 million) in church tax distributions.

The ELC continued to operate all cemeteries, and all religious and life-stance groups had equal access to them. Gufunes Cemetery in Reykjavik had a special area designated for burials of Muslims and persons of other non-ELC 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. According to the station's chief of programming, other religious groups could also broadcast their

religious services, but none had sought to do so.

The government continued to require persons 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

Jewish community leaders noted a slight increase in antisemitic rhetoric on social media during violence between Israel and Gaza-based Hamas in May. One incident involving a verbal confrontation, in which a man yelled at a person wearing a Star of David, occurred in the same time period.

Muslim community leaders voiced concerns about the ability to access physician-performed circumcisions. They said they had received reports of doctors being reluctant to perform circumcisions except for medical reasons. The Icelandic Medical Association Code of Ethics states, “A physician is free to follow his conscience and conviction” and may refuse to perform a medical act “which he considers unreasonable or unnecessary.”

Religious groups reported generally good relations with the government and society at large. Some religious leaders expressed frustration with increased secularism and low levels of religiosity in society.

A Gallup Iceland poll conducted in February and released on February 20 found 32 percent of the public expressed trust in the ELC, compared with 31 percent in 2020, 34 percent in 2019, 33 percent in 2018, 41 percent in 2009, and 61 percent in 1999.

The Forum for Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation, whose membership consists of registered religious and life-stance groups – including the ELC as well as other Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist groups – met virtually three times. Public health concerns stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic prevented in-person forum meetings for most of the year. Although the interfaith forum allowed unregistered groups to apply to join it, none had done so by year’s end.

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. The foundation also provided translation assistance to asylum seekers.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Embassy officials met with representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the MOJ, the government's registrar's office, 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, religious group relations with government and interfaith relations, and the impact of the subsidiary agreement between the ELC and the government.

Embassy officials continued to meet with representatives of the ELC, Roman Catholic Church, the Islamic Foundation of Iceland, the Chabad Jewish Community, Sidmennt, and various minority religious and life-stance groups to discuss such issues as their relations with the government, religious tolerance, the extent of their involvement in interfaith dialogue, access to physician-performed circumcision, and the role of religious groups in education and refugee resettlement.

In January, the Ambassador hosted religious leaders from the ELC, Catholic Church, Chabad Jewish Community, and Islamic Foundation of Iceland for a roundtable discussion on religious freedom. In April, the Charge delivered remarks on Holocaust Remembrance Day in conjunction with representatives from the Chabad Jewish Community, the German embassy, and the Polish embassy.

The embassy posted messages to social media marking Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Icelandic pagan holidays throughout the year, as well as National Religious Freedom Day and Holocaust Remembrance Day. The Ambassador posted messages on Facebook highlighting the embassy's engagement with diverse religious leaders and stressing the importance of religious freedom, including the visit of religious leaders to the embassy in January