

Iceland



Stable / Unchanged 

Religion

Population

Area

- Christians : **93.5%**
- Agnostics : **4.3%**
- Others : **2.2%**

332,000

103,000 Km²

Legal framework on freedom of religion and actual application

The constitution establishes the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) as the national Church, and grants it state support and protection.^[1] It guarantees people the right to form religious associations and to practise their religion in accordance with their beliefs. However, nothing may “be preached or practised which is prejudicial to good morals or public order”^[2]

The constitution also provides that everyone is equal before the law, irrespective of religion,^[3] and no person “may lose any of his civil or national rights on account of his religion, nor may anyone refuse to perform any generally applicable civil duty on religious grounds”.^[4]

Religious groups and secular humanist organisations apply to a district commissioner’s office for recognition and registration and a four-member panel reviews the applications. Registered religious groups and secular humanist organisations receive state subsidies based on membership numbers.^[5]

Every individual 16 years of age and older must pay a “Church tax” to the individual’s respective organisation!^[6] If there is no official affiliation, the tax is paid to the University of Iceland.^[7]

Religious instruction on Christianity, ethics, and theology, guided by “the Christian heritage of Icelandic culture, equality, responsibility, concern, tolerance, and respect for human value” is compulsory in public and private schools. Parents may request an exemption for their children by submitting a written application!^[8]

With respect to hate speech, the penal code prohibits publicly mocking, defaming, denigrating or threatening by comments or other expressions (such as pictures or symbols) a person or group for their religion!^[9]

Incidents

In February 2018 lawmakers, backed with the support of over 400 doctors, proposed a law banning circumcision of boys for non-medical reasons. The bill calls the procedure a violation of the rights of the child and draws a parallel with female genital mutilation, which is outlawed.

Jewish and Muslim religious leaders have called the legislation an attack on religious freedom. The president of the European Jewish Congress said: “We can only assume that this attempt to ban a core practice of Jewish communities comes from ignorance about the practice . . . rather than to send a message that Jews are no longer welcome in Iceland”. The imam of the Islamic Cultural Center of Iceland called the procedure, “deeply rooted in cultural and religious traditions”. The Bishop of the National Church of Iceland said the ban would “criminalise” Judaism and Islam in Iceland and such extreme measure should be avoided.^[10]

The Hate Crime database reports two crimes motivated by anti-Muslim bias – one, a physical assault, and another, an attack on a place of worship.^[11]

A statue was destroyed outside a church in November 2016.^[12] In January 2017, four churches in North Iceland were vandalised with antireligious slogans.^[13]

Prospects for Freedom of Religion

In the period analysed, there have been no other reported incidents or negative developments with regard to religious freedom in Iceland. If the proposed legislation criminalising circumcision of boys passes, it may have a negative impact on the religious freedom of Muslims and Jews in Iceland.

Sources / Endnotes

[1] Iceland’s Constitution of 1944 with Amendments through 2013, Article 62, [constituteproject.org](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iceland_2013.pdf?lang=en), https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iceland_2013.pdf?lang=en, (accessed 22nd February 2018).

[2] Ibid, Article 63.

[3] Ibid, Article 65.

[4] Ibid, Article 64.

[5] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, ‘Iceland’, International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, U.S. State Department, <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm#wrapper>, (accessed 22nd February 2018).

[6] Ibid.

[7] Iceland’s Constitution of 1944 with Amendments through 2013, Article 64.

[8] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, op. cit.

[9] General Penal Code of Iceland of 190, amended 2015), Article 233a, <http://www.parliament.am/library/Qreakan/islandia.pdf>, (accessed 22nd February 2018).

[10] H. Sherwood, ‘Iceland law to outlaw male circumcision sparks row over religious freedom’, The Guardian, 18th February 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/feb/18/iceland-ban-male-circumcision-first-european-country>, (accessed 27th February 2018); Associated Press, ‘Opposition erupts as Iceland eyes banning most circumcisions’, New

York Daily News, 25th February 2018, <http://www.nydailynews.com/newswires/news/world/opposition-erupts-iceland-eyes-banning-circumcisions-article-1.3840903>, (accessed 27th February 2018); J. ?iri?, 'Bill Proposes Banning Circumcision', Iceland Review, 19th February 2018, <http://icelandreview.com/news/2018/02/19/bill-proposes-banning-circumcision>, (accessed 27th February 2018).

[11] Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 2016 Hate Crime Reporting – Iceland, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, <http://hatecrime.osce.org/iceland>, (accessed 18th February 2018).

[12] Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, *op. cit.*

[13] 'Graffiti philosophers vandalise North Iceland church', Iceland Monitor, 4th January 2017, https://icelandmonitor.mbl.is/news/news/2017/01/04/graffiti_philosophers_vandalise_north_iceland_churc/, (accessed 18th February 2018).