

# United States Senate

March 1, 2022

The Honorable Rashad Hussain  
Ambassador at Large  
Office of International Religious Freedom  
United States Department of State  
2201 C Street, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable Ian Campbell  
Chargé d'Affaires ad interim  
U.S. Embassy Helsinki  
Itäinen Puistotie 14 B  
00140 Helsinki, Finland

Dear Ambassador Hussain and Chargé Campbell:

I write to you concerning the criminal prosecution of two Finnish Christians, Dr. Päivi Räsänen and the Reverend Dr. Juhana Pohjola, by the Office of the Prosecutor General of Finland. The ultimate consequences of these criminal prosecutions in Finland will stretch worldwide for religious freedom, far beyond the borders of Finland.

The Finnish Government's decision to bring criminal charges against Rev. Dr. Pohjola and Dr. Räsänen arose from their public statements about their Christian faith. Dr. Räsänen faces charges of "ethnic agitation" for authoring a 2004 pamphlet on sexual ethics and for more recent 2019 social media posts made with reference to a Bible verse. Rev. Dr. Pohjola faces a single charge for hosting one of Dr. Räsänen's pamphlets on his church's website. While this criminal prosecution began in April 2021 and focuses on events occurring years earlier, the case is only now approaching a final verdict at trial.

The origins and circumstances of the criminal prosecution against Rev. Dr. Pohjola and Dr. Räsänen are clear: these Christians are on trial for their faith—which is, apparently, incompatible with Finnish law. Even more concerning, Rev. Dr. Pohjola is a Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland, and Dr. Päivi Räsänen is a Member of the Finnish Parliament. If these Finnish leaders are unable to engage in freedom of speech and the free exercise of their Christian faith, what ultimately protects ordinary people exercising their faith in Finland and elsewhere from similar abuses of power at the hands of intolerant governments?

Religious freedom is a fundamental human right, and much of the world accepts that. In the United States, we are fortunate that the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution safeguards an individual's fundamental right to freely practice his or her religion without government intrusion, and it prohibits the government from promoting one religion over another under the law. As these prosecutions in Finland show, religious freedom remains at risk even in one of the most developed nations in the West.

The United States must always lead the fight for religious freedom on the world stage. Recognizing this duty, Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 1998 to establish an annual report on international religious freedom, detailing the status of religious freedom in foreign countries, violations of religious freedom by foreign governments, and the United States' efforts and policies in support of religious freedom. Under IRFA's authority, the Office of International Religious Freedom at the U.S. Department of State was established to promote "universal respect for freedom of religion or belief for all"<sup>1</sup> because the United States "recognizes religious freedom as an inalienable right and is therefore committed to its preservation and advancement for all."<sup>2</sup> These guiding principles are more important now than ever, as they are threatened in the West perhaps more than ever in recent history.

Therefore, I urge Ambassador-at-Large Hussain and Chargé d'Affaires *ad interim* Campbell, as the current leading U.S. diplomat in Finland, to closely examine the Finnish government's criminal prosecutions of Rev. Dr. Pohjola and Dr. Räsänen, as well as other actions the Finnish government may have taken that could undermine religious liberty. I ask that you stand up for religious freedom and stand against any erosion of this fundamental right—no matter where this erosion may occur. Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,



John Kennedy  
United States Senator

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<sup>1</sup> DEP'T OF STATE, OFF OF INT'L RELIGIOUS FREEDOM, *Our Mission*, available at <https://www.state.gov/bureaus-offices/under-secretary-for-civilian-security-democracy-and-human-rights/office-of-international-religious-freedom/> (last visited Feb. 28, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> DEP'T OF STATE, *Frequently Asked Questions: IRF Report and Countries of Particular Concern*, available at <https://www.state.gov/frequently-asked-questions-irf-report-and-countries-of-particular-concern/> (last visited Feb. 28, 2022).