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Finnish MP wins on all charges in major free speech trial

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- ***The former Finnish Minister of the Interior, faced three criminal charges for sharing her faith-based beliefs, including on Twitter***

ADF (30.03.2022) – <https://bit.ly/3DqJ6D5> - A Finnish court has upheld the right to free speech by dismissing all charges against Finnish MP Päivi Räsänen and Bishop Juhana Pohjola. In a unanimous ruling the court concluded that “it is not for the district court to interpret biblical concepts”. The prosecution was ordered to pay more than 60,000 EUR in legal costs and has seven days to appeal the ruling.

The former Minister of the Interior had been charged with “hate speech” for sharing her faith-based views on marriage and sexual ethics, in a 2019 [tweet](#), a 2019 radio debate, and a 2004 pamphlet. The bishop faced charges for publishing Räsänen’s pamphlet for his congregation over 17 years ago. Their case has garnered global media attention this year, as human rights experts voiced concern over the threat this case posed to free speech in Finland.

“I am so grateful the court recognized the threat to free speech and ruled in our favour. I feel a weight has been lifted off my shoulders after being acquitted. Although I am grateful for having had this chance to stand up for freedom of speech, I hope that this ruling will help prevent others from having to go through the same ordeal,” said Päivi Räsänen after her victory.

Christian teachings on trial

The high-profile trial received significant attention, particularly after the prosecution attacked core Christian teachings and cross-examined the bishop and Räsänen on their theology in court. The prosecutor began the first day of the trial by arguing that the case was not about beliefs or the Bible.

She then proceeded to quote Old Testament Bible verses and criticize the phrase “love the sinner, hate the sin”. In their closing statement, the prosecution alleged that the use of the word “sin” can be “harmful” and called for heavy fines in the event of a guilty verdict.

Free speech prevails

Räsänen's defence, supported by the legal advocacy organization [ADF International](#), argued that finding Räsänen guilty would significantly damage free speech in Finland. What Räsänen said, they argued, was an expression of Christian teaching.

The Court recognized that while some may object to Räsänen's statements, "there must be an overriding social reason for interfering with and restricting freedom of expression." The Court concluded there was no such justification.

"We welcome the Helsinki District Court's ruling. This is an important decision, which upholds the fundamental right to freedom of speech in Finland. In a free society, everyone should be allowed to share their beliefs without fear of censorship. This is the foundation of every free and democratic society. Criminalizing speech through so-called 'hate-speech' laws shuts down important public debates and poses a grave threat to our democracies," continued Coleman, author of '[Censored: How European Hate Speech Laws are Threatening Freedom of Speech](#)'.

International support for free speech

On both days of the trial (24 January and 14 February) crowds gathered outside the Helsinki courthouse to express their support for the politician and the bishop. [In Hungary, over 3000 people gathered](#) in front of the Finnish Embassy in Budapest to demonstrate against the charges before the closing arguments were heard.

Räsänen has also received letters of support from many denominations including the International Lutheran Council with Bishops and presidents of Synods from all over the world, the European Evangelical Alliance, Catholic and Pentecostal churches in Lithuania, representatives of the Evangelical, Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, Reformed and Unitarian churches in Romania, as well as the Evangelical Church of Macedonia, Christian NGOs in Latvia and other individuals.

Several US Senators penned [a letter addressed to Rashad Hussain](#), US Ambassador-At-Large for International Religious Freedom, expressing their concern over the "alarming" prosecution of Räsänen: "We are greatly concerned that the use of Finnish hate speech law is tantamount to a secular blasphemy law. It could open the door for prosecution of other devout Christians, Muslims, Jews and adherents of other faiths for publicly stating their religious beliefs," read the letter.

In January, UK MPs filed an Early Day Motion in parliament, highlighting the controversial prosecution and raising concerns about "the potential implications of that case for other countries".

Trial for a Tweet

Police investigations against Räsänen started in June 2019. As an active member of the Finnish Lutheran church, she had addressed the leadership of her church on Twitter and questioned its official sponsorship of the LGBT event 'Pride 2019', accompanied by an image of Bible verses from the New Testament book of Romans. Following this tweet, further investigations against Räsänen were launched, going back to a church pamphlet Räsänen wrote almost 20 years ago.

In the last two years, Räsänen attended several lengthy police interrogations about her Christian beliefs – including being frequently asked by the police to explain her understanding of the Bible.

In April 2021, Finland's Prosecutor General had brought three criminal charges against Räsänen. Two of the three charges Räsänen faced had come after the police made strong recommendations not to continue the prosecution. Räsänen's statements also did not violate the policies of Twitter or the national broadcaster, which is why they remained freely available on their platforms. The Helsinki District Court has now acquitted Räsänen of all charges.

Räsänen has served as a Finnish Member of Parliament since 1995. From 2004-2015 she was chair of the Christian Democrats and from 2011-2015 she was the Minister of the Interior. During this time, she held responsibility for church affairs in Finland.

Photo: Päivi Räsänen, Finland's interior minister from 2011 to 2015. | Courtesy of ADF International.

Paivi Rasanen: Finnish MP in Bible hate speech trial

BBC (25.01.2022) - <https://bbc.in/3KNgvuM> - A former Finnish interior minister has gone on trial for hate speech against gay people, following comments which she says were based on the Bible.

Prosecutors accuse Paivi Rasanen of making derogatory comments on three occasions, including in a 2019 tweet showing verses from the Bible.

Ms Rasanen denies the charges and says she stands behind her words.

The case is being seen as a test of whether personal religious beliefs can justify controversial language.

Announcing the charges in April last year, Finland's state prosecutor said Ms Rasanen had made comments likely to cause intolerance, contempt and hatred towards homosexuals. The charges relate to comments she made on three separate occasions: in an article published online, in a radio interview and in a 2019 tweet which included a photograph of an extract from the Bible.

In the tweet, she questioned why the Finnish Lutheran Church was officially supporting Finland's Pride week. The attached photograph contained verses from the Bible which appear to describe homosexual acts as shameful.

The court will have to decide whether citing the Bible can be considered a crime in some cases in Finland.

According to prosecutors, an online article by Ms Rasanen which was published in 2004 described homosexuality as a psychosexual development disorder.

The politician, who was Finland's interior minister from 2011-2015, arrived at court on Monday holding a Bible and said that she was "honoured to be defending freedom of speech and religion".

"I hope that today it can become clear that I have no wish to offend any group of people, but this is a question of saving people for eternal life," she continued.

However, prosecutors say that Ms Rasanen's statements violate the equality and dignity of homosexuals, and therefore go beyond the limits of freedom of speech and religion. In court on Monday, they argued that the case should be based on the secular legal system, not the writings of the Bible.

Although the charges against Ms Rasanen could technically lead to a prison sentence, prosecutors have asked that she receive a fine relative to her income.

A Lutheran bishop, Juhana Pohjola, who belongs to an independent, conservative Lutheran church, also faces charges for publishing one of Ms Rasanen's articles.

Finland has a population of about 5.5m people. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland is one of the country's two national churches and says it has about 4 million members.

Photo : Paivi Rasanen says she is defending her religious freedom / Reuters
