



ADF INTERNATIONAL

The case of Päivi Räsänen, MP and Bishop Juhana Pohjola

Background:

Dr. Päivi Räsänen has served as a member of the Finnish Parliament since 1995, was chair of the Christian Democrat Party from 2004-2015, and was Minister of the Interior from 2011-2015.

In 2019, Räsänen was accused of “hate speech” and interviewed by the police after questioning her church leadership on Twitter. She had posted a picture of some Bible verses and questioned the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland’s official partnership with the LGBT event “Pride 2019”. Räsänen attended several lengthy police interviews about her beliefs. On 29 April 2021, the Finnish Prosecutor General brought three criminal charges against Päivi Räsänen. The charges carry a maximum penalty of two years imprisonment. Päivi Räsänen is also accused of “hate speech” for publicly voicing her opinion on marriage and human sexuality in a 2004 pamphlet and for engaging in a debate on the same topic on a popular 2019 radio talk show.

Key Principles:

The right to freedom of speech is a fundamental right protected in all major human rights treaties and is the foundation of a democratic society. Vaguely worded “hate speech” laws undermine this important right by criminalizing speech based on highly subjective definitions of “offense”. Ultimately, this has a chilling effect on free speech, undermines public discourse, and drives diverse and minority views from the public square.

Key Facts:

- In June 2019, Räsänen questioned her church’s leadership on its official partnership with the LGBT event “Pride 2019” on social media, attaching an image of a Bible passage. The tweet remains online, having not violated Twitter’s own “hate speech” rules.
- On 1 Nov. 2019, authorities opened an investigation regarding the post, alleging Räsänen to have committed the crime of “ethnic agitation” which carries a maximum penalty of two years imprisonment. Räsänen attended a four-hour police interview.
- On 4 Nov. 2019, the Prosecutor General also called for investigations into a pamphlet Räsänen had been asked to write in 2004 on her church’s teaching on human sexuality.
- The Rev. Dr. Juhana Pohjola, Bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Mission Diocese of Finland, also faces criminal prosecution for publishing this pamphlet in 2004.
- On 29 April 2021, the Prosecutor General brought three criminal charges against Päivi Räsänen: for the 2004 pamphlet, her comments on a 2019 radio show and the 2019 tweet.
- On 30th March 2022 the Helsinki District Court unanimously dismissed all charges against Räsänen and bishop Pohjola, stating that “it is not for the district court to interpret biblical concepts”. The court also ordered the prosecution to pay more than 60,000 EUR in legal costs.
- Under Finnish law the prosecutor can appeal “not guilty” verdicts all the way to the Supreme Court of Finland. On 30th April, the prosecution filed its appeal against Räsänen and Bishop Pohjola. The prosecution demands tens of thousands of Euros in fines and insists that Räsänen’s and Pohjola’s publications be censored.

What’s at Stake:

Freedom of speech was hard won and is now protected by all major human rights treaties, it is the cornerstone of every free and democratic society. It’s not just Mrs. Räsänen’s freedom at stake, it’s everyone’s. If the state can tell you what you can and cannot say, and even what you can and cannot think, then we do not live in a free society.

Bottom Line: Everyone should be free to express their deeply held beliefs about important issues without fear of censorship or criminal sanction.