

NORWAY 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

In May the parliament passed a constitutional amendment to separate the church from the state, although some ties remain. The constitution now states that the country's values are based on its Christian and humanist heritage. The Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC), the state church prior to passage of the constitutional amendment, still receives some benefits not available to other religious groups.

There were some reports of discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom with the government and engaged with a diverse set of religious groups. The embassy sponsored events on anti-Semitism and in memory of Raoul Wallenberg. The embassy also held interfaith events.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to Statistics Norway, the population is 5.02 million. An estimated 79 percent of the population belongs to the ELC; however, actual church attendance is low.

Various Christian denominations (289,000 registered members) make up 57 percent of all registered members of religious groups outside of the ELC. Of these, the Roman Catholic Church is the largest and, because of recent immigration, has increased to an estimated 100,000 registered members (from 57,000 in 2010), while the Pentecostal Church has approximately 39,100 registered members. Membership in Muslim congregations is 112,000 and comprises 22 percent of all members of religious groups outside of the ELC in the country. Mosques are located throughout the country, but the Muslim population is most concentrated in the Oslo region. Membership in Jewish congregations decreased to 819 from 850

in 2009. There are two official Jewish congregations, one in Oslo and one in Trondheim.

Buddhists, Orthodox Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus together constitute less than 5 percent of the population.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The constitution provides that “all inhabitants are free to have and express religion.” The law on religious freedom and affiliation further specifies the right of individuals to choose, change, and practice their religion. Any person over the age of 15 years has the right to join or leave a religious community. While parents have the right to decide their child’s religion before age 15, the views of children over seven years must be taken into consideration and, when over 12 years, the child’s opinion must be given emphasis.

The constitution provides the right to practice religion, but some laws conflict with practical lifestyle aspects of certain religious groups. For example, by law the slaughter of an animal must be preceded by stunning or administering anesthetics, which conflicts with kosher slaughter requirements and some interpretations of halal meat preparation requirements. The law effectively bans the production of kosher meat in the country, thus requiring the Jewish community to import kosher meat. In particular, the ability to import kosher chicken is regularly an issue of concern.

The penal code covers violations of the right to religious freedom. It specifies penalties for expressions of disrespect for religious standpoints or followers and for public discrimination on the basis of religion. As of July 1 the Ministry of Defense allows employees to wear religious symbols, including headgear, with military uniforms. A ban remains on wearing religious symbols, including headgear, with police uniforms.

The equality and anti-discrimination ombudsman is charged with enforcing legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of religion and other personal characteristics. The ombudsman publishes non-binding findings in response to complaints that a person or organization has violated a law or regulation within the

ombudsman's mandate. The ombudsman also provides advice and guidance on anti-discrimination law.

In May parliament passed a constitutional amendment separating the state from the ELC. The government no longer appoints bishops, priests, and church clerks, although church staff are still considered public employees. Government ministers are no longer required to be members of the ELC, nor must the king be a member of the church. Although no longer under full state control, the ELC receives some benefits not available to other religious groups. The state supports the church financially and the law regulates clerical salaries and pensions.

Other religious groups may register with the government to receive state financial support. The government provides financial support to all registered denominations in proportion to their formally registered membership.

Individuals citing conscientious or other objection to military service may apply to serve in a civilian capacity.

Foreign religious workers are subject to the same visa and work permit requirements as other foreign workers.

The Christian Knowledge and Religious and Ethical Information (CKREE) course is offered in grades one through 10 (generally ages six to 16). CKREE reviews world religions and philosophies while promoting tolerance and respect for all religious beliefs. Citing the country's Christian history, the CKREE course devotes extensive time to studying Christianity, but includes discussion of other religious groups. This course is mandatory; there are no exceptions for children from other religious or non-religious groups. However, students may be exempted from participating in or performing specific religious acts during the course, such as attending Christmas church services.

Legislation in effect does not permit religious organizations to inquire about an applicant's sexual orientation or discriminate on the basis of gender, unless differential treatment is shown to have a legitimate purpose. Religious organizations retain the right to use discretion in their hiring processes, however, as "legitimate purpose" is broadly defined.

The government is a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research. Schools nationwide observe Holocaust Memorial Day on January 27 as part of a National Plan of Action to

Combat Racism and Discrimination. High school curricula include material on the deportation and extermination of Jewish citizens from 1942 to 1945.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Pentecost, Whit Monday, Christmas Day, and Saint Stephen's Day.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The government permitted individual schools to determine independently whether to implement policies banning religious garb such as burqas or niqabs. At the University of Tromsø, a professor banned wearing niqabs during his lectures. The university does not have an official policy in place for students who cover their faces, but in 2011 the parliament determined that individual teachers could require students to show their faces during class.

The government continued to support The White Buses, an extracurricular program that takes some secondary school students to the Auschwitz extermination camp in Poland and other Nazi concentration camps to educate them about the Holocaust.

In September Hadia Tadjik was appointed Minister of Culture. She is the first Muslim ever appointed to the cabinet.

In November the king declined to award the Royal Medal of Merit to Trond Ali Linstad based on anti-Semitic and anti-homosexual statements he had made. Linstad, a convert to Islam, was originally chosen for the award due to his work integrating minorities. However, when reports surfaced regarding his intolerant statements, the king determined that the remarks were inconsistent with the purpose of the medal.

Amnesty International expressed concern about the treatment of asylum seekers who claimed persecution for their religious beliefs. Specifically, the Norwegian Immigration Appeals Board (UNE) denied asylum to an Iranian convert to Christianity, determining he would be safe in Iran if he continued to hide his true religion. A recent, separate supreme court decision determined that UNE could not reject asylum seekers whose claims were based on persecution for their sexual preference on the assertion that they would be safe in their home country if they hid their "preferences." Lower courts have since used this supreme court decision as the basis for overturning the Iranian convert's asylum denial, holding that the

decision applied to other grounds for seeking asylum/refuge. UNE appealed and a final ruling for the Iranian convert is expected in summer 2013.

There was strong debate about prayer rooms (for both Muslim and Christian students) in schools in September, when an Oslo school permitted such a room on school premises. Conservative and populist politicians threatened to withhold funds for the Oslo budget if the prayer room was permitted. The school consequently withdrew its plans for a prayer room.

Khalid Haji Ahmed, the regional secretary in southeast Norway for the Labor Party's youth wing, stated he was only joking when he wished "best of luck eight times over" to activists who wrote on Facebook: "Damn Jew whores, wish Hitler could come back and shower you some more." The leader of the youth wing, Eskil Pedersen, condemned Ahmed's statements saying that they were contrary to the values and policies of the Labor Party.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In a January Holocaust Memorial Day speech, the prime minister apologized for the participation of the country's officials in the expulsion of Jews during World War II when the country was under Nazi occupation. The speech was the first formal direct apology from the government and was commended by religious figures. In November the head of the police department also apologized for police participation in expelling Jews during the war years. Some social commentators and religious leaders stated this was even more significant than the prime minister's Holocaust Memorial Day speech.

The government made a number of monetary grants to increase security for the Jewish community and to combat anti-Semitism in schools. The government allocated 7.2 million kroner (\$1.25 million) for security at the Jewish Religious Community's (DMT) facility and synagogue in Oslo. In addition to the funding, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security announced it would maintain a dialogue with the DMT, the Police Security Services, and the Police Directorate to ensure that the DMT's facilities were properly safeguarded. The Ministry of Education granted 6 million kroner (\$1.05 million) for programs that included training about anti-Semitism in schools throughout the next three years. The Ministry of Government Administration and Church Affairs will finance the DMT's new online anti-Semitism reporting mechanism.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were media and NGO reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, and prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom. Because ethnicity and religion were often inextricably linked, it was difficult to categorize many incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance. There were two reports of religious discrimination made to the equality and anti-discrimination ombudsman.

According to a December 2010 police report, approximately 11 percent of the 240 hate crimes registered in 2009 were religiously motivated. More recent statistics were not available. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and an opposition political leader called on the government to ensure that hate crimes were registered and publicized to the same extent as other crime statistics.

In an October report, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) reported that the police were not doing enough to map and combat hate crimes. The report recommended increased security measures for the Jewish community and warned that anti-Israeli attitudes might lead to anti-Semitism. The OSCE also expressed concern about labor and housing discrimination against Muslims.

The Norwegian Center against Racism published a report in July that detailed instances of mostly verbal harassment against Muslim immigrants in the hours following July 2011 attacks in Oslo and Utoya that killed 77. The harassment occurred before it became clear that the perpetrator was a white Norwegian. This was contrary to some media reporting that there was no harassment. There were no instances reported to the police, but some respondents stated they chose not to report harassment because they felt the complaints would not be addressed. Following the attacks, Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg called for “more democracy, more openness, and more humanity.”

A comedy program broadcast on public television in January included a joke about Orthodox Jews, stating that Orthodox Jews use two sets of cutlery for dinner because “they steal cutlery when they are in a restaurant.” When interviewed about the program, one of the comedians was unapologetic, noting that he mocked all groups equally.

KRIPOS (the national police unit for combating organized and other serious crimes) maintained a Web page for the public to contact police regarding online hate speech.

Commentators, terror experts, and government officials expressed concern that extremist views have increased among second-generation Muslims, particularly in the Oslo region.

Societal organizations combating anti-Semitism included the Norwegian Center against Racism, which received financial support from the government, and the Norwegian Association against Anti-Semitism.

A government-funded report published in May by the Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities detailed a national survey on attitudes towards Jews and Judaism in the country. In the survey, one in four respondents stated that Jews exploit the memory of the Holocaust to their own advantage and almost four in ten believed that Israeli treatment of Palestinians was equal to Nazi treatment of Jews during the Second World War. Other results indicated that 19 percent of respondents believed that “Jews see themselves as better than others” and 26 percent believed that “Jews are secretly working behind the scenes to promote Jewish interests.” Media and political figures, including then-Foreign Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, expressed dismay at the findings and stated that the Education Ministry would do more to teach young people about the Holocaust.

The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities organized a series of events that furthered interreligious dialogue and debate. The council includes the ELC and 12 other religious and humanistic communities, among them the Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist communities. The council, an umbrella organization that receives government support, sought to prevent differences in belief from leading to prejudice and xenophobia.

The Oslo Coalition for Freedom of Religious Beliefs facilitated coordination and international cooperation on religious freedom issues domestically and internationally. Among its priorities was facilitating teaching about tolerance and religious freedom.

Fritt Ord, a private foundation that promotes freedom of expression and public debate, awarded Algerian-Norwegian writer and activist Louiza Louhibi the Freedom of Expression Foundation Tribute. The award recognized her courage in the debate about sexual violence against women and for actively opposing extreme attitudes based on religious and political prejudices.

The Oslo Jewish Museum opened an exhibition on the Holocaust in Norway exactly 70 years after hundreds of the country's Jews were transported to Auschwitz. The country deported 40 percent of its Jewry, or 772 persons; only a handful of them survived, according to the museum. The remaining 60 percent fled to neutral Sweden.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. ambassador and embassy officers engaged with the government, NGOs, and community leaders on religious freedom. The embassy also regularly sponsored speakers and hosted events to highlight religious freedom, including an iftar (evening meal during Ramadan), an interreligious introduction to the Jewish holiday of Passover, and an interreligious Thanksgiving meal.

Further, the embassy co-sponsored events to remember Raoul Wallenberg and to discuss anti-Semitism. In collaboration with the Jewish community of Oslo, the embassy co-sponsored a screening of "The Last Flight of Petr Ginz," a documentary about a Czech Jewish child sent to Auschwitz during the Holocaust.