The Netherlands

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

Anti-Semitic incidents continued to occur; many appeared to be correlated with developments in the Middle East. Openly expressed societal resentment toward growing numbers of Muslims and their culture continued and fueled social tensions between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 16,485 square miles and a population of 16.3 million. Approximately 60 percent of the population has some religious affiliation, although many do not actively practice their religion. Approximately 55 percent consider themselves Christian; 6 percent Muslim; 3 percent other (Hindu, Jewish, or Buddhist); and 36 percent atheist or agnostic.

Society has become increasingly secularized. In general, church membership continued to decline. According to a 2006 study by the Government's Social Cultural Planning Bureau, church membership declined steadily from 76 percent of the population in 1958 to 30 percent in 2006 (16 percent Catholic and 14 percent Protestant). Only 16 percent regularly go to church. Although 55 percent regard themselves as Christian, among this group only 30 percent believe in God, while 50 percent are agnostic or hold vaguely defined beliefs. The European Values Study showed that of all Europeans, the Dutch consistently have the lowest levels of appreciation for religious institutions.

Roman Catholics constitute the largest religious group in the country; however, many express alienation from their religious hierarchy and doctrine. While 78 percent view the church as an important anchor of norms and values, 68 percent dismiss the church's views on social issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and divorce.

The country's Protestantism is heterogeneous. Among the Protestant churches, the Dutch Reformed Church remains the largest. Other Protestant denominations include Baptists, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Remonstrants.

An estimated 950,000 Muslims, constituting 5.8 percent of the total population, live in the country, primarily in the larger cities, including approximately 370,000 of Turkish background and 330,000 of Moroccan background. Other Muslims include those from the country's former colony of Suriname as well as large numbers of asylum seekers from countries such as Iran, Iraq, Somalia, and Bosnia. A network of mosques and cultural centers serves the Muslim community. There are approximately 400 mosques: more than half service the Turkish community, while another 140 and 50 cater to the Moroccan and Surinamese communities, respectively. The Contact Body for Muslims and Government, representing approximately 80 percent of the Muslim community, discusses the community's interests with the Government.

Research from the Jewish Social Work organization showed that the country has approximately 45,000 Jews, although the Stephen Roth Institute and the Council of Europe estimates the number at closer to 30,000. Less than one-quarter of those belong to active Jewish organizations. The Central Jewish Consultation, an umbrella group of the Jewish community's main organizations, represents the community's interests in discussions with the Government.
There are approximately 95,000 Hindus, of whom 85 percent originally came from Suriname and approximately 10 percent from India. The country hosts smaller numbers of Hindus from Uganda, as well as similar movements based on such Hindu teachings as Ramakrishna, Hare Krishna, Sai Baba, and Osho. The Buddhist community has approximately 17,000 members.

A small number of foreign missionary groups operate in the country.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Government at all levels sought to protect this right in full and did not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors. The Constitution permits the Government to place restrictions on the exercise of religion only on limited grounds, such as health hazards, traffic safety, and risk of public disorder.

The Government provides state subsidies to religious organizations that maintain educational facilities. The Government provides education funding to public and religious schools, other religious educational institutions, and health care facilities, irrespective of their religious affiliation. To qualify for funding, institutions must meet strict nonreligious criteria in curriculum, minimum size, and health care.

Religious groups are not required to register with the Government; however, the law recognizes the existence of religious denominations and grants them certain rights and privileges, including tax exemptions. Although the law does not formally define what constitutes a "religious denomination" for these purposes, religious groups generally have not experienced any problems qualifying as religious denominations.

The Government of Turkey exercises influence within the country's Turkish Muslim community through its religious affairs directorate, the Diyanet, which is permitted to appoint imams for the 140 Turkish mosques in the country. There is no such arrangement with the Moroccan Government, which maintains connections with the approximately 100 Moroccan mosques through a federation of Moroccan friendship societies but has no mechanism to exercise direct influence in the country. Authorities continued to express concern regarding Turkish and Moroccan interference with religious and political affairs, because such interference appeared to run counter to Government efforts to encourage integration of Muslims into society.

To counter undesired foreign influence, the Government continued to provide subsidies to universities providing training for local persons interested in becoming imams to ensure that they have a basic understanding of local social norms and values. Selected universities cooperated with the main Muslim organizations on designing training programs. The Government continued to require all imams and other spiritual leaders recruited in Muslim countries to complete a yearlong integration course before permitting them to practice in the country.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

Disputes arose when the exercise of the rights to freedom of religion and speech clashed with the strictly enforced ban on discrimination. Such disputes were addressed either in the courts or by antidiscrimination boards. Complaints were repeatedly filed against religious or political spokesmen who publicly condemned homosexuality. However, longstanding jurisprudence dictates that such statements, when made on religious grounds, do not constitute a criminal offense absent an intention to offend or discriminate against homosexuals.

The Equal Opportunities Committee and the courts repeatedly addressed the wearing of headscarves in schools and places of employment. The prevailing legal opinion holds that the wearing of headscarves may be banned only on narrow grounds, such as security considerations or inconsistency with an official government uniform. As it had done in the previous year, in 2006 Parliament adopted a resolution urging the Government to ban public wearing of burqas (a loose robe worn by some Muslim women that covers the body from head to toe). Legal experts consulted by the previous Integration Minister opined, however, that a general ban (as requested by Parliament) does not appear possible under the law. The Government stated in February 2007 that it is willing to consider banning "face-covering clothing in the interest of public order and safety."

In other areas, employers have been rebuked publicly by antidiscrimination boards for failure to allow non-Christians to take leave from work on their religious holidays, for objecting to Sikhs wearing turbans or to Muslim women wearing headscarves, or for objecting to observance of food requirements on religious grounds.
The law permits employees to refuse to work on Sunday for religious reasons unless the work's nature, such as in the health sector, does not permit such an exception.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees in the country.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Anti-Semitism

The vast majority of the population is not anti-Semitic. However, certain groups opposed to Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories, such as the Arab European League and the Stop the Occupation Movement, frequently used seemingly anti-Semitic language and images to express political views. Explicitly anti-Semitic sentiments also prevailed among certain segments of the Muslim community and among fringe nationalist and neo-Nazi groups. Two distinct groups were responsible for most anti-Semitic incidents: North Africans in sympathy with Palestinians and supporters of right-wing extremist ideologies.

The frequency of incidents appeared to be correlated to the political situation in the Middle East. In its report covering the period between January 2005 and May 2006, the Center for Information and Documentation on Israel (CIDI) registered 159 anti-Semitic incidents in 2005, compared to 326 in 2004; however, in an appendix on incidents that occurred during the July-August 2006 conflict in Lebanon, it recorded a sharp increase (105). Although the overall number of incidents tended to decrease, CIDI identified as one major cause for anti-Semitic behavior the dissemination of anti-Western and anti-Semitic propaganda from the Middle East, as well as sermons by imams that promulgated anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Anti-Semitism among right-wing extremists appeared to increase during the reporting period. The independent Registration Center for Discrimination on the Internet described several hundred right-wing Web sites as extremist, including those of Stormfront.org, Polinico, National Alliance, and Holland Hardcore. The sites targeted not only Jews but also Muslims, blacks, and homosexuals.

Extreme rightwing anti-Semites expressed themselves primarily by vandalizing Jewish buildings and monuments, and CIDI expressed concern about the sharply increased vandalism of monuments and desecration of cemeteries. Dozens of such incidents were recorded during the reporting period. In late October 2006, for example, 15 gravestones were vandalized in a Jewish cemetery in Beek.

CIDI, which frequently criticized what it regarded as inadequate prosecution of anti-Semitic events by the Public Prosecutor's Office, reported considerable improvement during the reporting period; however, CIDI called for more government action against anti-Semitic Internet sites, describing the Internet as one of the main sources for dissemination of anti-Semitic and racist ideologies. On March 1, 2007, the Government opened a new cybercrime Web site through which citizens can report radical statements and hate e-mail.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

Muslims faced continuing societal resentment, attributable to growing perceptions that Islam is incompatible with Western values, that Muslim immigrants have failed to integrate, and that levels of criminal activity among Muslim youth are higher than the national average. Major incidents of violence against Muslims were rare; however, minor incidents, including intimidation, brawls, vandalism, and graffiti with abusive texts were quite common. Expanding pockets of young Muslims and youths identifying themselves as "native Dutch" were responsible for most instances of violence. A number of offenders were arrested, prosecuted, and convicted.

A number of outspoken politicians, mainly from the right, openly argued that Islam is incompatible with Dutch traditions and social values. Geert Wilders, whose Party of Freedom (PVV) won nine seats in the November 2006 general elections on an anti-immigrant and anti-Islam ticket, was the most prominent of several politicians seen as encouraging public opinion against Muslims by claiming that Islam preaches violence and hatred.

It is a crime to engage in public speech that incites religious, racial, or ethnic hatred, and the Government prosecuted several cases during the reporting period. The Government continued a comprehensive outreach campaign to counter anti-Muslim sentiments, stressing that the majority of Muslims fit comfortably into Dutch society. At the same time, the Government made clear that it would combat groups espousing violence in support of an extremist Islamic agenda. These efforts raised public awareness and triggered debate, but concerns about the policy's effectiveness remained.
Government and nongovernmental organizations cooperated to combat discrimination and promote dialogue and mutual understanding. The Ministry of Education reminded schools of longstanding guidelines prescribing the teaching of different religions and ideologies in conjunction with combating discrimination and intolerance. The Ministry of Welfare subsidized a special program to teach children about World War II and the persecution of Jews.

The Government regularly told prosecutors and the police to give proper attention to incidents of discrimination. The Government also took measures to deal more effectively with incitement to discrimination on the Internet. Despite these measures, critics claimed that law enforcement agencies did not give sufficient priority to instances of discrimination, and prosecutions and convictions remained rare.

The labor federations worked to include stipulations in collective bargaining agreements that permit non-Christian employees to take leave on non-Christian holy days. Such stipulations were included in most agreements.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. In addition, it continued to engage in dialogue with all major religious groups.

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