The Netherlands

International Religious Freedom Report 2006
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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 during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to an overall environment of religious freedom and mutual tolerance. The killing of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004 by a Dutch Islamic extremist and subsequent reactions, however, brought to the surface simmering tensions between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities, which continued to color relations between the two groups. In the public debate, Dutch Muslims often felt compelled to defend themselves against criticism for such perceived problems as the poor integration of Muslim immigrants into society, the high level of criminal activity among Muslim youth, and the conservative views of orthodox Muslims on women's rights and corporal punishment. The level of anti-Semitic incidents remained relatively high, and many incidents appeared to have been politically motivated in reaction to developments in the Middle East.

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 approximately 16.3 million. Approximately 60 percent of the population had some religious affiliation, although many did not actively practice their religion. Approximately 31 percent considered themselves Roman Catholic; 14 percent Dutch Reformed; 6 percent Muslim; 6 percent Calvinist Reformed; 3 percent other (Hindu, Jewish, or Buddhist); and 40 percent atheist or agnostic. Other Protestant denominations included Baptists, Lutherans, Anglicans, Protestants from the United States, and Remonstrants. Approximately 20 percent of citizens, primarily among those who left the "traditional" churches, described themselves as "seekers of spiritual or philosophical truths." These persons tended to gravitate toward (although not necessarily join) newer or nontraditional religious movements, such as Pentecostal groups, Jehovah's Witnesses, Hare Krishna, Transcendental Meditation, Scientology, Theosophy, or Anthroposophy.

Society had become increasingly secularized during the several decades prior to the reporting period. According to a 1995 study of the Government's Social Cultural Planning Bureau, religious membership declined steadily from 76 percent in 1958 to 41 percent in 1995, and continued to decrease, although at a slower pace. Membership was decreasing among all religions except Islam. Approximately one-quarter of church members were active within their religious communities. In a 2002 study, an estimated 25 percent of Roman Catholics, 33 percent of Dutch Reformed, 55 percent of Calvinist Reformed, and 50 percent of Muslims attended church/mosque at least once every two weeks. Approximately 70 percent of the total population never attended services. There were no figures for Jewish participation rates.

Research revealed that those who left a religion rarely returned. Nonetheless, significant numbers of those who left their religions continued to consider themselves to be members of a religious group. The beliefs and practices of many of these adherents developed into what some described as a selective approach to religion, accepting what they consider the positive, but not the negative, aspects of a particular religion.

Following the secularization that began in the 1960s, many Roman Catholics left their church. Among those remaining, many expressed alienation from their religious hierarchy and doctrine. For example, most of the country's Catholics expressed no objections to female or married priests and differed with church thinking on a number of sensitive doctrinal issues.

The country's Protestantism was quite heterogeneous. Among the Protestant churches, the Dutch Reformed Church remained the largest, although it also suffered the greatest losses to secularization. Church membership declined by two-thirds in the fifty years prior to the reporting period. The second largest Protestant group, the Calvinist Reformed Church, was less affected by membership losses and even succeeded in attracting former members of the Dutch Reformed Church. In 2003, the main Dutch Protestant churches merged into the United Protestant Churches; however, a few orthodox communities refused to merge.

Because of a long-established climate of religious tolerance, Jews numbered more than 140,000 in 1940. Amsterdam harbored one of the largest and liveliest Jewish communities in Europe. During World War II, 106,000 Dutch Jews were killed, the highest percentage in Western Europe. Of the remainder, approximately 5,000 remained in the country, while the rest fled. In the post-war period, Jewish life slowly revived and flourished. While the Dutch have generally shied away from discussing this grim period of their history, Prime Minister Balkenende, in May 2005, acknowledged publicly Dutch "collaboration, indifference and treason" during the war, and "the lack of humanity and understanding" towards Jews in the post-war period.
Research from the Jewish Social Work organization showed that the country counted approximately 45,000 Jews during the reporting period, although the Stephen Roth Institute and the Council of Europe estimated the number to be closer to 30,000. Less than one-quarter of those belonged to active Jewish organizations such as religious communities, hospitals, schools, cultural and welfare centers, and sports and entertainment clubs. Since 1997, the Jewish community’s main organizations had an umbrella group, the Central Jewish Consultation, which represented the community’s interests in discussions with the Government.

The number of Muslims continued to rise because of relatively high birth rates and the continued practice of Turkish and Moroccan immigrants marrying partners from their countries of origin. By 2005, 950,000 Muslims, constituting 5.8 percent of the total population, were estimated to live in the country, primarily in the larger cities, including approximately 341,000 Turks and 295,000 Moroccans. Other Muslims came from the country’s former colony of Suriname. In the past decade, Muslim numbers further increased because of the large numbers of asylum seekers from countries such as Iraq, Iran, Somalia, and Bosnia. A network of mosques and cultural centers served the Islamic community. This network was organized to conform to the national system of subsidies, which underwrites cultural activities geared to social orientation and the promotion of equal opportunities. The number of mosques increased to approximately 400: more than half catered to Turks, approximately 140 to Moroccans, and approximately 50 to Surinamese. The founding of more than forty-five Islamic schools further reflected the increased influence of Islam. Muslims were not separately organized in the political sphere. The Contact Body for Muslims and Government (CMO), representing approximately 80 percent of the Muslim community, discussed the community’s interests with the Government. The official Muslim community unanimously condemned the Van Gogh killing.

There were approximately 95,000 Hindus, of whom 85 percent originally came from Suriname and approximately 10 percent from India. The country also hosted 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 was quite small, with approximately 17,000 members.

There was a small number of foreign missionary groups operating 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 funding for education to public as well as to 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 for curriculum standards, 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 law provides for religious minorities to have their views broadcast on radio and television. For example, broadcasting time was allotted to the Islamic Broadcasting Foundation, an alliance of all Muslim groups in the country.

The government of Turkey exercised influence within the country’s Turkish Islamic community through its religious affairs directorate, the Diyanet, which was permitted to appoint imams for the 140 Turkish mosques in the country. There was no such arrangement with the Moroccan government. The Moroccan government maintained 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.

The authorities expressed 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. For example, government authorities insisted on strict observance of mandatory school attendance up to the age of sixteen, despite appeals by foreign imams to keep girls under the age of sixteen at home.

To counter undesired foreign influence, the Government began 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. Given the strict separation between the state and religion, however, the authorities themselves could not organize such training, and instead depended on private organizations. In addition, the assembled Muslim organizations decided, in February 2005, to found an Islamic institute to educate imams and Islamic theologians in coordination with individual university programs; the institute was not set up at the end of the period covered by this report. Parliament proposed phasing out the issuance of work permits to foreign imams by 2008 to increase the number and influence of locally educated religious leaders. As an interim measure, the Government decided that all imams and other spiritual leaders recruited in Islamic countries first must follow a yearlong integration course before they would be allowed 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 condemn 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 (CGB) and the courts also repeatedly addressed the wearing of headscarves in schools and places of employment. The prevailing opinion is that the wearing of headscarves may be banned only on narrow grounds, such as security considerations or inconsistency with an official government uniform. In 2003, the CGB stated that a recent ban by Amsterdam schools on wearing burqas in class is not discriminatory. The CGB stated that open teacher-student and student-to-student interaction is more important than the right to wear a burqa. In late 2005, the Parliament adopted a resolution urging the Government to ban public wearing of burqas. The integration minister replied that a general ban was not possible under the law, but she was investigating whether such a ban was possible under specific circumstances, such as at school or in the workplace.

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. In 2004, the CGB ruled against a company that had denied employment to a Turkish applicant because he intended to attend Friday services at a mosque. This was considered a violation of freedom of religion. According to the CGB, Friday service for Muslims is equivalent to Sunday service for Christians. It ruled that employers are obliged to take account of reasonable religious demands from their employees, except in exceptional circumstances.

In 2003, legislation took effect that explicitly 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. The legislation came in the wake of charges by the Calvinist Reformed Social Union of religious discrimination by employers and reports of job applicants being turned down for employment for refusing to work on Sundays for religious reasons.

In November 2005, a Dutch lower court ordered the Government to make a formal Schengen Treaty exception to a German entry ban on the Reverend and Mrs. Sun Myung Moon, founders of the Unification Church.

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 manifestly 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.

In its report covering the period between January 2004 and May 2005, the Center for Information and Documentation on Israel (CIDI) registered 326 anti-Semitic incidents in 2004, compared to 334 in 2003. Although these figures declined for the second year in a row, CIDI qualified the level of incidents as "continuously high" and 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 enhance anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Religious communities tended to live alongside each other in harmony. Among them, the Protestant denominations in particular promoted the Jewish cause and reached out to the Islamic community. However, a May 2005 poll by the private consultancy Motivaction showed 10 percent of the native Dutch population admitted to being racist, 27 percent said they disliked foreigners, and 43 percent said Islam was incompatible with Western society. The government minister for integration withheld comment and said she would wait for a more official government report, due later in the year.

In the fall of 2001, widespread societal resentment towards growing numbers of Muslims and their culture became apparent. Populist politician Pim Fortuyn, who was killed shortly before the 2002 general elections, received broad support for his characterization of Islam as "a backward culture" that is intolerant towards women and homosexuals and that allows practices from the Middle Ages.

The November 2004 killing of Dutch filmmaker and critic of Islam, Theo van Gogh by a Dutch Muslim extremist exacerbated existing social tensions. The killing triggered a brief upsurge of violent incidents, which had largely subsided by the end of the period covered by this report. However, minor incidents, including intimidations, brawls, vandalism, and graffiti with abusive texts, were frequent. Expanding pockets of both radicalized Muslim and other youth, who identified themselves as "native Dutch," were responsible for many of these instances of violence. A number of offenders were arrested, prosecuted, and convicted. Polls revealed that popular attitudes towards Muslims were rapidly becoming more negative, and a majority viewed their presence as a threat. In a February 2006 poll by the R&M Matrix research agency, a majority of "native Dutch" found Islam to be intolerant (52 percent of participants), violent (40 percent), women-unfriendly (70 percent), and humorless (54 percent); 54 percent opined that Islam and democracy were incompatible. Muslims already faced continuing criticism for such perceived problems as the poor integration of Muslim immigrants into society, the high level of criminal activity among
Muslim youth, and the conservative views of orthodox Muslims on topics such as women, homosexuals, and corporal punishment. Overcoming habitual reticence and abandoning Dutch libertarian attitudes toward religion, a number of outspoken politicians, mainly from the right, openly argued that Islam is incompatible with Dutch traditions and social values.

The Muslim community reacted with restraint to the cartoon controversy and refrained from any outburst of public violence. Government and Parliament seized upon the controversy to emphasize the "inviolable" rights of freedom of speech and freedom of religion. If someone feels offended, the only venue is to sue. The prime minister added that freedom of speech was "no obligation to offend."

Former parliamentarian Ayaan Hirsi Ali, known for her criticism of what she called Islam's intolerance of homosexuals and its subjugation of women, generated substantial controversy in the Muslim community. In May 2006, she announced that she would move to the United States.

In response to the controversy, the Government launched a comprehensive outreach campaign to counter anti-Muslim sentiments, stressing that the majority of Muslims fit comfortably into Dutch society. The Government also opened three imam training programs, with a fourth scheduled to open soon. At the same time, the Government made clear that it would combat directly groups espousing violence in support of an extremist Islamic agenda. These efforts raised public awareness and triggered debate, but concerns remained about the effectiveness of the new measures. Many in the Muslim community noted an increased sense of alienation from Dutch society.

The Government repeatedly condemned any form of anti-Semitism and formed a comprehensive action plan to combat any form of discrimination. According to this plan, parents have primary responsibility for preventing anti-Semitic incidents; schools can also help to combat discrimination and inculcate respect and tolerance. Public debate and dialogue are other tools to achieve these goals, to which end several nongovernmental organizations have launched projects, such as Een Ander Joods Geluid (An Alternative Jewish Viewpoint), to foster debate on equality, tolerance, and human dignity. Also, the Dutch Coalition for Peace has called on Jews, Palestinians, and other Muslims in the country to work together to restore peace in the Middle East.

Stricter instructions to prosecutors and the police took effect in 2003 to ensure proper attention is given to incidents of discrimination. Measures were also taken to deal more effectively with incitement to discrimination on the Internet. Despite these measures, critics claimed that law enforcement agencies still do not give priority to instances of discrimination. Prosecutions and convictions remained rare.

The Ministry of Education tasked schools in longstanding guidelines to teach about different religions and ideologies in conjunction with discrimination and intolerance, with explicit attention being paid to the persecution of Jews in World War II. The Ministry of Welfare subsidized a special program to teach children about World War II and the persecution of Jews. In particular, the program was designed to raise awareness about the consequences of prejudice. The Government also sought to promote dialogue and supported initiatives that aim to create a better understanding between Jews and Muslims. The Anne Frank Foundation published a book, called Fifty Questions on Anti-Semitism, primarily intended for teachers who interacted with Muslim students.

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. It also engages in dialogue with all major religious groups.

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