



## U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

### Norway

#### International Religious Freedom Report 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respected this right in practice. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway, the state church, enjoys some benefits not available to other faiths.

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 religious freedom.

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 approximately 150 thousand square miles and a population of approximately 4.6 million. Citizens were considered to be members of the state church unless they explicitly associated themselves with another denomination; 86 percent of the population (approximately 3.9 million persons) nominally belonged to the state church. However, actual church attendance was rather low.

Other religious groups operated freely and included various Protestant Christian denominations (152,975 members; 3.9 percent of the population), Muslims (77,857 members; 1.9 percent), and Roman Catholics (46,308 members; 1.2 percent). Buddhists, Jews, Orthodox, Sikhs, and Hindus were present in very small numbers, together comprising less than 1 percent of the population. The Norwegian Humanist Association-the only national organization for those who did not formally practice any religion, including atheists-had 69,610 registered adult members and claimed 10,000 children as associate members. Persons could not register as full members until they reach adulthood. The Government estimated that an additional 5.6 percent of the population (roughly 252,000 persons) did not formally practice religion.

The majority of European and American immigrants, who made up approximately half of the foreign-born population, were either Christian or nonreligious, with the notable exception of Muslim refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Most non-Western immigrants practiced Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, or Hinduism. Foreign missionaries and other religious workers operated freely in the country.

Forty-two percent of the country's religious minorities were concentrated in the Oslo metropolitan area, including 76 percent of the country's Muslims and the country's entire Buddhist community.

#### 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 Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway is the state church. It is supported financially by the state, and there is a constitutional requirement that the king and at least one-half of the cabinet belong to this church.

On March 14, 2006, the U.N. Human Rights Committee voiced concerns that a section of the constitution is incompatible with Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Specifically, the constitution provides that individuals professing the Evangelical-Lutheran religion must raise their children in the same faith.

Church officials and some politicians spoke in favor of a greater separation in the state-church relationship. In 2003, the Government appointed an official State-Church Commission to review the future of the state-church relationship. The commission's purpose is to ascertain whether the state-church system should be maintained, reformed, or discontinued. The commission has its own secretariat and has members from several parts of society, including different church groups and other religions, politicians, legal experts, and the Sami people.

On January 31, 2006, the commission presented its assessments. A large majority of members advocated that the existing state-church system be abolished. The Storting (parliament) is expected to make a final decision in 2008, based upon the commission's assessment.

A religious community is required to register with the Government only if it desires state support, which is provided to all registered denominations in accordance with their membership.

There are no special licensing or registration requirements for foreign religious workers. Foreign religious workers are subject to the same visa and work permit requirements as other foreign workers. The Anti-Discrimination Act is viewed as another legislative means to improve the protection (and promotion) of human rights recognized under the ICCPR. The act (which passed in Parliament on June 3, 2005) is intended to strengthen protections against ethnic discrimination. Specifically, the act incorporates provisions of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. The act forbids unequal treatment on the basis of religion and belief, in addition to ethnicity, national origin, and skin color, and applies to all areas of society. The law forbids direct discrimination: an employer can neither hire, nor exclude, an employee based upon that employee's particular origin. The law also protects employees against indirect discrimination. For example, an employer cannot completely prohibit wearing hijabs as such exclusion will theoretically prohibit women from wearing hijabs for religious reasons.

On January 1, 2006, the Government established an Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombudsman and an Anti-Discrimination Tribunal to deal with such human rights issues.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

A 1997 law introduced the Christian Knowledge and Religious and Ethical Information (CKREE) course for grades one through ten (ages six to sixteen). The CKREE reviews world religions and philosophy, while promoting tolerance and respect for all religious beliefs. Citing the country's Christian history (and given the stated importance of Christianity to society), the CKREE devotes an extensive amount of time to studying Christianity. This class is mandatory, without any exceptions for children of other faiths. On special grounds, students may be exempted from participating in (or performing) specific religious acts, such as church services or prayer, but they cannot forgo religious instruction. Organizations for atheists, as well as Muslim communities, have contested the legality of forced religious teaching, claiming that it is a breach of freedom of religion and parents' rights to provide religious instruction to their children. In 2002, the Humanist Association appealed the case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg and the United Nations Human Rights Commission. In November 2004, the UNHRC decided that the practice of a mandatory religious class broke with human rights principles, violating Article 18 of the ICCPR. The UNHRC held that the law violated the parental ability to choose their children's religious and moral upbringing. The case was scheduled for debate at the ECHR in the fall of 2006.

In response, the Government gave parents the right to exempt their children from the CKREE until August 2005 (when a new curriculum was implemented). The UNHRC demanded that the Government grant parents either the ability to fully exempt their children from the class, or make the course religion/belief-neutral.

Under the new curriculum, Christianity, as the state religion, continued to receive a larger percentage of the class's teaching time than other religions. The final law states that children cannot receive complete class exemption. Limited exemptions may occur with respect to specific classroom activities, such as singing hymns and/or public prayer. This partial exemption right also applies to other courses, such as gym or cooking-classes.

The Humanist Association did not support the recent curriculum changes. The association noted in a letter to the UNHRC that the CKREE curriculum revisions were only cosmetic and did not create a religion and belief-neutral class. In addition, the association advocated that the partial exemption right be expanded. Accordingly, the association claimed that the UNHRC concerns had not been heeded, and the CKREE curriculum, as revised, continued to violate Article 18 of the ICCPR.

In the past, Muslims have encountered some difficulties in obtaining local permission to build mosques in areas where Muslims are concentrated. Since 1975, the town council in Drammen had regularly turned down applications to build a mosque. However, in 2004, the Muslim community in Drammen received permission to build a mosque. No other problems with permission to construct mosques have been recorded.

The Workers' Protection and Working Environment Act permits prospective employers to ask job applicants who are applying for positions in private schools, religious schools, or day care centers, whether they agree to teach and behave in accordance with the institution's or religion's beliefs and principles.

In 2006, the city of Oslo recommended banning the wearing of burqas and nikabs in schools. Accordingly, the city sent its recommendation to the Ministry of Knowledge in order to determine necessary changes to existing laws which would effectuate such a ban in the 2006-2007 school year.

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

Jewish organizations had reported that anti-Semitic incidents doubled from 2002 to 2003. The majority of the forty reported incidents in 2003 involved verbal harassment of primary and secondary school Jewish students by non-Jewish students. A small number of incidents involved threats against Jews. There were no reports of anti-Semitic violence or vandalism through June 2006.

The Government was vigilant in fighting anti-Semitism and promoting religious tolerance. In April 2004, Prime Minister Bondevik met with two Jewish children who had been harassed on the basis of their religion and, at the conclusion of the meeting, issued a strong public statement condemning anti-Semitism and calling on the public to fight anti-Semitism more actively.

Norway is a member of the International Task Force for Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research. In 2003, the Government instituted annual observance of Holocaust Memorial Day on January 27 in schools nationwide, as part of a National Plan of Action to Combat Racism and Discrimination. In addition, according to the Oslo-based Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities, the curriculum of the CKREE class includes teaching high school students about the deportation and extermination of Norwegian Jews from 1942 to 1945.

### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. A Cooperation Council for Faith and Secular Society included the state church and other religious communities, including the Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and secular humanist communities. The Oslo Coalition for Freedom of Religious Beliefs facilitated closer coordination and international cooperation on religious freedom issues, and supported projects in China, Central Asia and the Caucasus, and Indonesia that develop contacts, foster dialogues on interreligious understanding, and establish nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) with representatives from different religions. The Ecumenical Council of Christian Communities was active in promoting cooperation within the Christian community. There was cooperation between the various religious communities on human rights issues in the past several years. Bilateral dialogue between the state church and the Muslim and Jewish communities generated statements in support of minority rights and human rights.

A Christian newspaper, *Magazinet*, published cartoons lampooning the Prophet Muhammad. The cartoons, originally published by a Danish newspaper, triggered an international furor, including the burning of Norway's embassy in Syria and attacks upon Norwegian troops in Afghanistan. In February 2006, the editor of *Magazinet*, following receipt of twenty e-mail death threats, publicly apologized for offending the Muslim community. The Islamic Council welcomed the apology and offered the editor its protection. The apology (and the council's acceptance) received governmental praise, including from the minister of labor and social inclusion.

### 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 2004, the U.S. Embassy sponsored the participation of a U.S. constitutional law expert in an Oslo Coalition seminar on religious freedom. During the current reporting period, representatives from the embassy's political and economic affairs section participated in a seminar involving religious issues sponsored by the Oslo-based organization "Dialogue for Peace." In addition, public affairs staff attended a seminar on peace and democracy in Afghanistan which included extensive discussions on religious freedom. Finally, the embassy sponsored a Norwegian international visitor of Middle Eastern descent who attended a program in the United States on managing diversity in a multi-ethnic society. The program focused in large part on how to deal with different religious groups in society.

Released on September 15, 2006

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