



## Norway

### International Religious Freedom Report 2007

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 religious groups.

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.

There were very few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice.

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 150,000 square miles and a population of 4.6 million. Citizens are considered to be members of the state church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway, unless they explicitly note otherwise. For example, citizens may elect to associate themselves with another denomination, nonreligious organization (e.g., the Norwegian Humanist Association), or no religious affiliation at all. An estimated 85 percent of the population (3.9 million persons) nominally belongs to the state church. However, actual church attendance is quite low.

Other religious groups operate freely and include various Protestant Christian denominations (129,761 members), Muslims (72,023), and Roman Catholics (46,440). Buddhists, Jews, Orthodox Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus are 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--has 76,470 registered members. The Government estimated that an additional 6.7 percent of the population (approximately 252,000 persons) does not formally practice religion.

The majority of European and American immigrants, who make up approximately half of the foreign-born population, are either Christian or nonreligious, with the exception of Muslim refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo. Most non-Western immigrants practice Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, or Hinduism. Foreign missionaries and other religious workers operate freely.

Of religious minority members, 42 percent are concentrated in the Oslo metropolitan area, including 76 percent of Muslims and most of the 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. The state supports it financially, and there is a constitutional requirement that the King and at least one-half of the cabinet belong to this church.

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. In March 2007 the Ombudsman began evaluating a case involving the Church of Norway's bishop in Oslo, who publicly refused to admit gay priests into the diocese. The bishop's refusal of one applicant was brought before the Oslo Diocese Council and overturned. By the end of the reporting period, the Ombudsman had not rendered a decision on the matter. During the reporting period, political parties and the media extensively debated the issue.

On March 14, 2006, the U.N. Human Rights Committee voiced concern that a section of the Constitution is incompatible with article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). That section concerns the constitutional provision that individuals professing the Evangelical Lutheran religion must raise their children in that faith.

Church officials and some politicians spoke in favor of 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 was to ascertain whether the state-church system should be maintained, reformed, or discontinued. The commission had its own secretariat and included members from several areas of society, including different church groups and other religious groups, politicians, legal experts, and the Sami people.

On January 31, 2006, the commission presented its assessment. Most members recommended that the existing state-church system be abolished. The *Storting* (Parliament) was expected to make a final decision in 2008, based upon the commission's assessment.

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

There are no special licensing or registration requirements for foreign religious workers. Such 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 in June 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 reject a potential employee based upon that person's origin. The law also protects employees against indirect discrimination. For example, an employer cannot completely prohibit the wearing of hijabs, since such exclusion would theoretically prohibit women from wearing hijabs for religious reasons.

#### *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 1 through 10 (ages 6 to 16). 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 religious groups. 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' right to provide religious instruction to their children. In 2002 the humanist association appealed the case to the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) and the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHRC). In November 2004 the UNHRC decided that the requirement of a mandatory religion class violated article 18 of the ICCPR and stated that the law violated parents' right to determine their children's religious and moral upbringing. In response, the Government gave parents the right to exempt their children from the CKREE until August 2005 (when a new curriculum was implemented). In December 2006 the ECHR reviewed the case. In a verdict rendered on June 29, 2007, the ECHR held in a near-split decision that article 2 of the European Human Rights Convention's Protocol No. 1 was violated. In reply the Minister of Education stated that the verdict would be evaluated, the Government would determine whether additional CKREE course amendments would be introduced, and that the case would not be appealed.

Under the new curriculum, Christianity, as the state religion, continued to receive a larger percentage of the class's teaching time than other religious groups. The final law states that children cannot receive complete class exemption. Limited exemptions may occur with respect to specific classroom activities, such as hymn singing or public prayer.

The humanist association did not support the curriculum changes. The association asserted 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. 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.

During March 2006 a mosque in the city of Bergen was required to close its temporary premises due to building code violations. The Muslim community planned on relocating to a permanent location, which had not been fully constructed. The mosque community planned to protest the eviction by holding a prayer vigil in a public square. A representative of a small political party opposed the vigil and threatened to place pig ears around the square and taunt vigil attendees with pig noises. This proposed act raised widespread public protest. Neither the vigil nor the planned protest took place. The city of Bergen paid approximately US\$26,600 (160,000 Norwegian kroner) to address the building code violations and stated that the mosque could remain at its temporary location until the end of 2007.

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. The city sent its recommendation to the Ministry of Education and Research to determine necessary changes to existing laws to implement such a ban in the 2006-07 school year. In February 2007 the Ministry encouraged schools to ban the use of nikabs, while emphasizing that no legislation on the issue would be forthcoming. Every school would be allowed to independently determine whether to implement such a ban. During the reporting period, there were no public reports that any school implemented such a ban.

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 Jewish population is relatively small, with about 1,000 members. There was an increase in the number of reports of anti-Semitic incidents during the reporting period. There were several incidents of vandalism of Jewish cultural property (synagogues and cemeteries). On July 15, 2006, in Oslo three men physically attacked and verbally abused a Jewish citizen. Around the same time, the Jewish community reported threatening phone calls and e-mails. On July 19, 2006, a man defecated on the stairs of a synagogue and then threw stones at it, causing minor damage, including two broken windows. At the end of the reporting period, there were no arrests in either the assault case or the act of vandalism.

On September 17, 2006, automatic weapon fire hit the synagogue in Oslo, causing minor damage and igniting a nationwide debate on the rising level of anti-Semitism. The police arrested four men in the attack; law enforcement authorities released three of the suspects on their own recognizance, while one remained in custody pending trial at the end of the reporting period. Police believe the shooting may have been in part a protest of the 2006 Israel-Lebanon conflict. Following the attack, an imam visited the synagogue and denounced the shooting.

Articles, reports, and political cartoons appeared in the media that vilified and demeaned the Jewish people and community and minimized the Holocaust, particularly during the July-August 2006 conflict involving Israel and the terrorist organization Hizballah in Lebanon. One caricature appearing in a major Oslo newspaper showed Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert as a Nazi concentration camp commander. Jostein Gaarder, a prominent Norwegian author, published an article entitled "God's Chosen People," that many within and outside the country considered anti-Semitic for its tone and biblical interpretations.

The country is a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on 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 included teaching high school students about the deportation and extermination of the country's Jews from 1942 to 1945.

In August 2006 the Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities opened an exhibition and research center in Villa Grande, Nazi collaborator Vidkun Quisling's World War II-era residence. The center focuses on new research,

education, and information-sharing activities, such as sponsoring exhibitions and conferences in the areas of religious, ethnic, or racially motivated discrimination and violence.

### **Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination**

There were no public reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice, beyond the anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim incidents mentioned in this report. A Cooperation Council for Faith and Secular Society included the state church and other religious communities, among them 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, the Caucasus, and Indonesia that developed contacts, fostered dialogue on interreligious understanding, and established nongovernmental organizations with representatives from different religious groups. The Ecumenical Council of Christian Communities promoted cooperation within the Christian community. During the past several years, various religious communities cooperated on human rights issues. Bilateral dialogue between the state church and the Muslim and Jewish communities generated statements in support of minority rights and other human rights.

### **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. The U.S. Embassy regularly sponsored speakers and events to highlight religious freedom. The Embassy sponsored a leading authority on American philosopher Hannah Arendt to lecture at the Holocaust Center in Oslo in October 2006 in support of the center's commemoration of the centenary of Arendt's birth. The event provided an opportunity for scholars to discuss links between Arendt's philosophies and the destructive impact of religious intolerance, particularly within the context of anti-Semitism.

Also during the reporting period, the Embassy hosted an interfaith/Thanksgiving dinner for leaders of Oslo's diverse faith communities. Attendees included representatives from the city's Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican, Mormon, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist communities. The dinner provided an opportunity to promote religious dialogue. On March 28, 2007, embassy officials met with the Islamic Council to discuss religious freedom in the country. During the reporting period, embassy officials also met with other religious communities.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)