



Norway

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2009

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway, the state church, enjoys some benefits not available to other religious groups.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

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

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

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 150,000 square miles and a population of 4.75 million. Citizens are considered to be members of the state church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway, unless they explicitly state otherwise. For example, citizens may elect to associate themselves with another denomination, nonreligious organization (e.g., the Norwegian Humanist Association), or to have no religious affiliation at all. An estimated 82 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 (166,000 registered members), Muslims (84,000), Roman Catholics (54,000), and Jews (850). Buddhists, Orthodox Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus are also present in small numbers, together constituting less than 1 percent of the population. The Norwegian Humanist Association--the largest national organization for those who do not formally practice any religion, including atheists--has 79,870 registered members. An unknown number of persons belong to religious institutions but do not formally register with the Government, so they are not reflected in the statistics.

The majority of European and American immigrants, who make up approximately 45 percent 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. Of religious minority members, 55 percent are concentrated in the Oslo metropolitan area, including 57 percent of Muslims and most of the Buddhist community.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free

practice of religion.

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.

In 2008 there was a public debate about introducing greater separation in the state-church relationship. In April 2008 the Minister of Culture presented the results of a parliament-commissioned report on the state and church relationship that had been five years in the making and had included significant public input. The report called for maintaining the state church but for further democratization of the Church and for the Government to consider changes to the Constitution that would further separate church and state functions. One of the immediate effects was the signing of a church agreement that gives the state church the ability to select, but not appoint, its own bishops, a role that had previously been fulfilled by the Government. The legal power to officially appoint bishops will not be transferred to the Church until Parliament amends the Constitution on this point, which it was expected to do during the 2009-11 session.

The Government observes the following religious holidays, all of which are Christian, as national holidays: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Pentecost, Whit-Monday, Christmas Day, and St. Stephen's Day.

A religious community must register with the Government only if it desires state financial support, which is provided to all registered denominations in proportion to their formally registered membership. Some faith groups argued that this registration requirement disadvantages their efforts to get funding, since the faiths most popular among immigrants generally, including Islam and Roman Catholicism, are also most popular among individuals who are in the country either illegally or as political refugees, and who may be leery of contact with state officials.

In February 2009 the Police Directorate, responding to a petition by a Muslim woman, proposed that the hijab be permitted to be worn with the police uniform in order to recruit a broader field of candidates for police work. This proposal caused an intense nationwide political and media debate, and the police union came out firmly against the change. Some commentators argued that all policewomen should dress the same, and citizens might be afraid that they would not receive equal treatment from a policewoman wearing a hijab. Two weeks after it initially expressed its support for the Police Directorate's proposal, the Justice Ministry withdrew its support and ruled against allowing the hijab to be worn. Many in the Muslim community were disappointed by the Government's reversal.

In February 2006 the city of Oslo submitted a plan to ban the wearing of burqas and nikabs to the Education Directorate for evaluation. The Education Directorate subsequently submitted the plan to the Ministry of Education, concerned that the ban might contravene the Norwegian Constitution. In August 2006, while still awaiting an advisory opinion, the city of Oslo implemented the ban. The Ministry of Education submitted the issue to the Ministry of Justice, which in September 2007 determined that a ban on burqas and nikabs was not inconsistent with Norwegian law and international conventions. However, there were no reports of the ban being enforced by the end of the reporting period.

Norway is a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research and assumed the rotating chairmanship of the organization in 2009. 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, high school curriculums include the deportation and extermination of Jewish citizens from 1942 to 1945. The Government also continued to support the foundation "The White Buses," which takes Norwegian secondary school students to Auschwitz, Poland, to educate them about the Holocaust. In August 2007, following a multiyear, \$10 million (NOK 60 million) construction project, Norway opened the Center for Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities in the wartime residence of Nazi collaborator Vikdun Quisling. The associated museum features a history of the Holocaust in the country. During the reporting period,

the Center supported Holocaust-related research and sponsored seminars related to the Jewish experience during the Nazi occupation period.

A 1997 law introduced the Christian Knowledge and Religious and Ethical Information (CKREE) course for grades 1 through 10 (generally ages six 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 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.

Organizations for atheists, as well as Muslim communities, contested the legality of mandatory religious education, claiming that it was a breach of freedom of religion and parents' right to provide religious instruction to their children. After the case was heard before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in 2002 and again in 2006, the Government modified the curriculum and expanded the education to more thoroughly discuss other religions while continuing an emphasis on Christianity as the religion of the majority of citizens.

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.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the reporting period.

After an intense political and media debate in January 2009, and particularly due to widespread criticism that it would infringe on free speech, the Government withdrew from consideration a proposed modification of the penal law that would have criminalized "proven attacks on religion or philosophy." Although proposed by a centrist Christian party, the public debate on the law made reference to the Danish and Norwegian "cartoon controversies" of the past few years, and the proposed law was cited by one political party as evidence of caving in to "stealth Islamification."

In December 2008 Muslim inmates in a Trondheim prison complained that the prison served food that contained pork. Prison authorities said the incident was the result of a mistake. More than one-third of prison inmates are Muslims, but none of the facilities offer halal food. One Muslim politician suggested that prisons serve halal food as a default, with prisoners able to request nonhalal food on the side; however, the Government did not act upon the suggestion.

In May 2008 two Christian pastors, one American and one Norwegian, were arrested for sharing their faith with signs and public preaching near a parade route during the country's independence celebration. In November 2008 and January 2009, the American pastor lost appeals, which he based on a free speech defense, of his trial court sentence before the appellate and supreme courts, respectively. The trial court had ruled that the pastors' right to free speech could not exceed the police's power to ensure order. A suit by the Norwegian pastor based on similar events that occurred in 2007 was on file at the ECHR, which was scheduled to decide in October 2009 whether to hear the case. The American pastor also intended to file a case with the ECHR, based on the May 2008 events, by July 2009.

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

The Government did not enforce a ban on the wearing of burqas and nikabs in schools, permitting every school to independently determine whether to implement such a ban; during the reporting period, there were no reports that any school enforced a ban.

A ban remained in place on policewomen wearing the hijab with police uniforms, despite the Government having earlier briefly supported a proposal to allow wearing of it.

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 who had not been allowed to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

During the reporting period, Islam and so-called Islamification in the country were subjects of increasing debate among politicians, the media, and civic and religious groups. In February 2009 the second-largest political party, the Progress Party, published a list of events over the last decade that it purported showed that the country was being "Islamified by stealth." Measured by opinion polls, the Progress Party's popularity increased after it published its list. The list was heavily criticized by other political parties and prominent commentators, but the notion that Islam was insidiously threatening the country's society and culture provided a background to several substantive issues. Covered in Section II, these included debates over the use of the hijab by policewomen, halal food in prisons, and the proposed law that would have banned "attacks on religion."

Anecdotal press reports during the reporting period indicated that job seekers with first or last names that appear to be Muslim were much less likely to receive responses to their applications for employment.

During the reporting period, and especially during Israel's operations in Gaza in late December 2008, anti-Semitism, and a corresponding debate about it, significantly increased in intensity. During the Gaza events, violent anti-Israel riots broke out on several occasions in Oslo. A pro-Israel march in Bergen was cancelled when the police stated that it could not guarantee participants' safety. The location of the line between criticism of Israeli policy and anti-Semitism was frequently discussed. The general atmosphere for Jews in the country, however, worsened to the point where Foreign Minister Stoere visited a synagogue on January 18, 2009 to show solidarity with Jewish citizens who "feel alienated" and are "experiencing growing anti-Semitism."

During January 2009 both a former prime minister and a high-profile commentator on U.S. policy were accused of making anti-Semitic comments. Their statements were criticized as blurring the line between Jewishness and Israeli government policy.

In mid-January 2009 a first secretary at the Norwegian embassy in Saudi Arabia used a government e-mail system to send out a chain e-mail with images comparing Israeli soldiers to Nazi soldiers. Some politicians urged the Government to fire the employee; there was no further information on the case by the end of the reporting period.

The small Jewish community in the country was frightened by the rise in anti-Semitism during the Gaza war. A leading newspaper reported that it had difficulty finding Jews who were willing to be publicly interviewed, as they felt they might be targeted. The chief rabbi of the Oslo Synagogue received daily piles of hate mail full of anti-Semitic vitriol.

On May 29, 2009, a fire destroyed a 204-year-old Lutheran church in Vaaler, Hedmark Province; police concluded

that the fire was an act of arson.

On May 17, 2009, 10 graves were vandalized at a Lutheran church in the town of As, Akershus Province.

On May 14, 2009, the cemetery of the Mosaic Religious Community in Oslo (the Jewish community), established in 1869, was vandalized. Several gravestones were defaced with Nazi symbols; on one, "the war is not over" was written.

On May 1, 2009, vandals knocked over 35 gravestones near the Lutheran Nordstrand church in Oslo. Additionally, the vandals destroyed flowers, broke windows, and wrote "Satan Lives" on the door of the church.

The press heavily criticized a controversial television comedian for telling a joke that trivialized the killing of Jews during the Holocaust. A nongovernmental organization (NGO) reported the incident to the police, but the comedian was not charged with any wrongdoing.

There were no other reported societal abuses or cases of discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice during the reporting period.

The Council for Religious and Philosophical Communities includes the state church and other religious communities, among them the Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist communities, as well as secular humanist groups. The Council, acting as an umbrella organization, organized many events that furthered interreligious dialogue and debate, including a 2008 "dialogue conference" that was expected to be repeated in 2009, and a debate about religion in educational institutions.

The Oslo Coalition for Freedom of Religious Beliefs facilitated closer coordination and international cooperation on religious freedom issues both domestically and outside of the country. The Coalition was conducting research projects on New Directions in Islamic Thought and Practice, Facilitating Freedom of Religion, Missionary Activities and Human Rights, and Teaching for Tolerance and Religious Freedom.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy regularly sponsored speakers and other events to highlight religious freedom. During the reporting period, the Ambassador hosted both an interreligious Thanksgiving dinner and, in January, a human rights NGO reception during which the importance of religious freedom, both in the country and around the world, was discussed. In May 2009 the Embassy also invited Imam Yahya Hendi, a professor at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, to speak to the Islamic Council, Muslim youth groups, and the Theological Faculty of the University of Oslo about religious freedom in the United States.