



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report](#) » [Europe and Eurasia](#) » Norway

## Norway

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

### **July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report**

Report

**September 13, 2011**

---

The constitution and other laws and polices protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections. 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 law and in practice. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the government during the reporting period.

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, but prominent societal leaders took positive steps to promote religious freedom.

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 4.9 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, a nonreligious organization (for example, the Norwegian Humanist Association), or to have no religious affiliation. An estimated 79 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 Christian denominations (246,000 registered members), which make up 55 percent of all registered members of religious groups outside of the state church. Of the Christian denominations, the Roman Catholic Church is the largest and, because of recent immigration, has increased to an estimated 57,000 registered members, while the Pentecostal Church has approximately 40,000 registered members.

Membership in Muslim congregations (there are 126 mosques nationwide) has increased to 93,000 (from 84,000 in 2009), while membership in Jewish congregations has decreased to 818 (from 850 in 2009).

Buddhists, Orthodox Christians, Sikhs, and Hindus are also present in small numbers, together constituting less than 5 percent of the population. The Norwegian Humanist Association--the largest national organization for those who do not formally practice any religion--has 81,000 registered members. An unknown number of persons belong to religious institutions but do not formally register with the government; 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 registered religious minority members, 45 percent are concentrated in the Oslo area, including 45 percent of Muslims and 22 percent of Buddhists.

## Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

### Legal/Policy Framework

Please refer to Appendix C in the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for the status of the government's acceptance of international legal standards <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/appendices/index.htm>.

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally enforced these protections.

The constitution provides that "all inhabitants are free to have and express religion." The law on religious freedom and affiliation further specifies the right of individuals to choose, change, and practice their religion. Any person over the age of 15 years old has the right to join or leave a religious community.

Religious freedom is further secured by the European Convention on Human Rights, which provides individuals the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

The constitution provides the right to practice religion in general, but there have been examples of existing law conflicting with practical lifestyle aspects of certain religious groups. For example, by law the slaughter of an animal must be preceded by stunning or administering anesthetics. The Muslim communities were split over whether stunning conflicts with halal requirements, but they ultimately accepted a compromise with authorities over this issue. The law effectively bans the production of kosher meat in the country, thus requiring the Jewish community to import kosher meat. The community's ability to import kosher meat, and particularly kosher chicken, is regularly an issue of concern, due to the country's strict regulations on import of agricultural products.

The penal code covers violations of the right to religious freedom. It specifies penalties for expressions of disrespect for religious standpoints or followers and for public discrimination on the basis of religion.

Citizens have a right to sue the government for violations of religious freedom and may also file cases with the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR).

The equality and antidiscrimination ombudsman was established in 1978 as the gender equality ombudsman. In 2006 the Office of the Ombudsman was reorganized to include discrimination in general. The ombudsman's mandate is to enforce the Gender Equality Act, antidiscrimination provisions of the Worker Protection and Working Environment Act, and the Discrimination Act. The latter act prohibits discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, national origin, ancestry, skin color, language, religion, and ethical orientation.

The country issued a hate crimes report in December based on data from 2008 and 2009, the latest years for which figures have been publicly released. Because ethnicity and religion are often inextricably linked, it is difficult to determine the precise number of incidents characterized by religious intolerance, although religion is tracked separately as a motive for hate crimes. Of the 240 registered hate crimes in 2009, 21 were reported as motivated by religious intolerance, while race or ethnicity was listed as the motive for 71 percent of registered hate crimes in that period. In comparison there were 220 registered hate crimes in 2008, 12 of which reportedly involved religious intolerance, while 81 percent involved race or ethnicity as the motive. Religious communities are working with the state to improve the database by specifying whether an incident is motivated by anti-Semitism or other forms of religious intolerance. They noted their belief, however, that many religious minorities preferred not to file complaints with the police or community organizations and monitoring bodies, because they feared reprisal or doubted a positive outcome. To assess the accuracy of the figures, police conducted a national survey in 2009, the results of which showed that more than 2 percent of the population had been victims of hate crimes. Thus, the true number of incidents, both violent and verbal, was significantly higher than the reported figures presented. Both police and civil society organizations have characterized the current system as flawed, as it results in under- and over-reporting. Authorities reportedly have hired experts to locate and address inaccuracies in the filing system. The Police Directorate conducted awareness training on hate crimes identification and reporting in 2010.

The C  
Affair  
the U  
Exter  
cons:  
polici

As the state church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Norway enjoys some benefits not available to other religious groups. The state supports the church financially, and there is a constitutional requirement that the king and at least one-half of the cabinet belong to this church. The king, who heads the state church, formally nominates bishops, and clerical salaries and pensions are regulated by law.

There is continued public debate about introducing greater separation between church and state. In 2008 the minister of culture presented a parliament-commissioned report on the state and church relationship. The report, which took five years to complete and included significant public input, called for maintaining, but further democratizing, the state church. It proposed changes to the constitution to separate church and state functions further. One of the immediate effects was an agreement, signed by the seven parties in parliament, to support amending the constitution to give the state church the ability to select, but not appoint, its bishops. The agreed wording also would institute the constitutionally recognized system of public financing for all religious groups, similar to existing public financing for the state church. Parliament has not yet acted on the proposed constitutional amendments.

Individuals citing conscientious or other objection to military service are free to serve their duty time in a civilian capacity.

In June the National Courts Administration (NCA) ruled that restricting religious and political symbols in the courtroom is unnecessary and that existing neutrality rules are comprehensive enough to accommodate religious and political symbols. The administrative body stated that if any parties to a court hearing should object to the wearing of religious or political symbols in court, the issue should be resolved on a case-by-case basis under disqualification rules. The decision effectively reversed the same administrative body's September 2009 decision, which banned judges from wearing the hijab in the courtroom. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ), which previously validated a hijab ban not only in courtrooms but also among the police force, noted that the NCA is an independent body that the MOJ cannot instruct.

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.

Foreign religious workers are subject to the same visa and work permit requirements as other foreign workers.

A 1997 law introduced the Christian Knowledge and Religious and Ethical Information (CKREE) course for grades one through 10 (generally ages six to 16). The CKREE course 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 course devotes an extensive amount of time to studying Christianity. This course is mandatory; there are no 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. After objections from atheists as well as Muslim communities, 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.

During the reporting period, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) rejected an Islamic center's application to build a mosque in Oslo with funds from Saudi Arabia. The MFA also suggested that it would not allow Saudi Arabia to fund a planned mosque in Tromsø. In connection with both decisions, media quoted the foreign minister as saying that, based on religious freedom concerns, it would be paradoxical to approve Saudi Arabian financing for a mosque in Norway when it is illegal to establish a Christian congregation in Saudi Arabia.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Pentecost, Whit Monday, Christmas Day, and Saint Stephen's Day.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

In April parliament amended the Worker Protection and Working Environment Act (WPWEA) and the Gender Equality Act to remove exemptions for discrimination on religious grounds. The amendments removed religious organizations' explicit right to inquire about an applicant's sexual orientation or discriminate on the basis of gender, unless the differential treatment is shown to have a legitimate purpose. Previously the WPWEA permitted employers to ask job applicants applying for positions in religious or other private schools and day care centers whether they would agree to teach and behave in accordance with the institution's or religion's beliefs and principles. Religious organizations retain the right to use discretion in their hiring processes, however, as "legitimate purpose" is broadly defined.

The government did not enforce a ban on the wearing of religious garb such as burqas and niqabs in schools, permitting every school to determine independently whether to implement such a ban. There were no reports during the reporting period of students asking to wear the niqab or burqa.

A ban remained on policewomen wearing the hijab (head covering) with police uniforms, despite the government's earlier support of a proposal to allow wearing it. In August the Equality and Antidiscrimination Tribunal ruled that banning religious headscarves in police uniform regulations violated the Antidiscrimination and Equality Act, confirming an earlier decision by the equality and antidiscrimination ombudsman. The justice minister and the Police Federation responded that after a thorough political and judicial evaluation of the regulations concerning police uniforms, the decision to forbid hijabs would remain in force.

In May the Directorate of Education granted permission to Foreningen Fredsskolen to establish an Islamic elementary school in Oslo, despite objections from governing coalition and opposition party politicians. The city of Oslo appealed the decision to the Ministry of Education, arguing that the decision was undermining integration in Oslo. The minister of education rejected the appeal, stating that to deny the school's application based on integration concerns could be discriminatory and violate human rights, since there are 95 Christian schools in the country and no Muslim ones. The

issue was further debated in November when media reported that at least two other groups had applied for permission to establish private Islamic schools in Oslo.

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

### Section III. Status of Societal Actions Affecting Enjoyment of Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses and discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, but citizens were generally tolerant of diverse religious practices.

Debate continued over alleged "morality police" in an Oslo district populated largely by immigrants. The debate began when a leading newspaper reported complaints from Muslims and non-Muslims who have been scolded or threatened for not wearing conservative dress, eating before sunset during Ramadan, or acting "too western." The government reported that it will address the issue of social control among minorities as part of a broader action plan on gender equality being developed at year's end. The Ministry of Children, Equality, and Social Inclusion also worked with the Nordic Council of Ministers to address the issue at the regional level.

In February Oslo municipality commenced its Oslo Extra Large (OXLO) campaign for the year aimed at combating the growing incidence of "morality police" in Muslim communities. This year's campaign posters, describing the city as a place that welcomes diversity, were placed at bus and tram stops and metro stations, and schools and school leaders and teachers were encouraged to discuss the campaign with students. OXLO-Conference 2010 took place in September with the theme "Dialogue in a Multi-Cultural Society." More than 120 participants from municipal and state agencies, volunteer organizations, and media and religious communities attended the event, which included an openly homosexual American imam as a speaker.

In March a state-owned broadcasting company aired a television news feature, highlighting anecdotal reports of the bullying of Jewish students, particularly by Muslim youth. In response to the news report, the Ministry of Education created an interdisciplinary working group in May to recommend ways to counter increasing incidents of racism and anti-Semitism in primary and secondary schools. The Center for Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities served as the secretariat for the group, which was developing recommendations to the government at year's end.

The Oslo city government also launched a project to research students' attitudes toward and knowledge of religious minorities, with a particular focus on anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. In March Oslo's mayor invited representatives from the Jewish community, the Islamic Council, the Christian Council, the Holocaust Center, and the Municipal Department of Cultural Affairs and Education to consult on what the country can do about harassment of religious minorities and to produce a report on the problem.

Anecdotal press reports during the reporting period indicated that job seekers with first or last names that appear to be Muslim continue to be less likely to receive responses to their applications for employment. Their employment prospects, while still not equal to those of ethnic Norwegians, improved during the reporting period.

During the reporting period, politicians, the media, and civic and religious groups continued to debate Islam and so-called Islamification in the country. These debates included exchanges over using the hijab with police uniforms and wearing burqas and niqabs in public. Muslim leaders and NGO representatives have expressed concern that these types of debates serve to marginalize Muslims in society by focusing on distinctions between Muslims on the one side and mainstream society on the other. Other commentators have expressed concern that more extreme views were increasing among second-generation Muslims.

The government is a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research. Schools nationwide observe Holocaust Memorial Day on January 27 as part of a National Plan of Action to Combat Racism and Discrimination. In addition high school curriculums include learning about the deportation and extermination of Jewish citizens from 1942 to 1945. The government also continued to support the foundation The White Buses, an extracurricular program that takes some secondary school students to Auschwitz, Poland, to educate them about the Holocaust. During the reporting period, the Center for Studies of Holocaust and Religious Minorities (housed in the WWII-era residence of Nazi collaborator Vidkun Quisling) continued to support Holocaust-related research and sponsored seminars related to the Jewish experience during the Nazi occupation period.

Media reported on August 21 that a mosque in Fredrikstad had been tagged with graffiti, including a Nazi symbol. The mayor of Fredrikstad reportedly denounced the incident. After the mosque was tagged a second time, a woman confessed to the crime, stating that it was not motivated by religion but resulted from "inebriation." On December 21, the woman was given a 28-day suspended sentence and a 10,000 Norwegian krone fine (\$1,700).

On September 8, media reported that one taxi company would not permit its drivers to wear turbans. The equality and antidiscrimination ombudsman responded that an employer must have a very good reason for barring an employee from wearing religious head garb. After local authorities intervened, the company allowed the complainant to wear a smaller, black turban.

In October one of the country's leading newspapers published on its front page a painting by a Norwegian artist under the headline, "This painting did not get to be hung." The painting, which portrayed a blood-splattered Israeli flag and faceless soldiers over a pile of skulls and body parts, had been removed a few days earlier by French authorities from the artist's traveling exhibit at the French Cultural Center in Damascus. The exhibit had been billed as homage to the children of Gaza. In an opinion editorial, the rabbi of the Oslo Jewish Community wrote that the painting crossed the line from legitimate anti-Israel criticism to anti-Semitism. The rabbi called on the government to distance itself from the messages in the artwork, which he said could promote hatred and dehumanization of Jews. He questioned the editors' decision to publish the painting, which he said steps on "my symbols, my faith, and my cultural identity," without additional context from the Israel-Gaza war that would show the suffering of both sides. The editors responded that their decision to publish the painting was not anti-Semitic but was a protest directed at the state of Israel.

The country has several civil organizations designed to combat anti-Semitism, including the Norwegian Center Against Racism and the Norwegian Association Against Anti-Semitism. The latter organization was revitalized in May, after being dormant for five years.

The Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway was established in 1996 and includes the state church and 12 other religious and humanistic communities, among them the Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist communities. The council seeks to prevent differences in belief from being used as a basis for prejudice and xenophobia and has received government support for its work since 1998. The council, acting as an umbrella organization, organized many events that furthered interreligious dialogue and debate, including a debate about religion in educational institutions.

The Oslo Coalition for Freedom of Religious Beliefs facilitated closer coordination and international cooperation on religious freedom problems both domestically and outside the country. The coalition continued to research new directions in Islamic thought and practice; how to facilitate freedom of religion, missionary activities, and human rights; and how to teach 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. During the reporting period, the U.S. embassy regularly sponsored speakers and hosted events to highlight religious freedom, including an iftar (evening meal during Ramadan) and an interreligious Thanksgiving meal. The embassy takes advantage of exchange programs such as the International Visitor Leadership Program in its outreach to a diverse set of religious communities.

[Back to Top](#)