



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Sweden

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 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 173,732 square miles and a population of 9.1 million. Approximately 77 percent of the population belonged to the Church of Sweden. Increasing numbers of persons have left the Church of Sweden each year since it separated from the state in 2000. Between November 2, 2004, and November 1, 2005, 68,040 persons left the Church. Church of Sweden studies found that individuals left primarily for economic reasons; membership carries a tax of 1.19 percent of members' incomes. In 2004, the Church of Sweden baptized 68.5 percent of children, a figure that has steadily declined over the past two decades. Confirmations declined more sharply; according to the latest available figures, less than 40 percent of Swedish fifteen-year-olds were confirmed in 2004, as opposed to 80 percent in 1970.

There was an estimated 145,000 Roman Catholics, of whom 82,000 were registered with the Roman Catholic Church. Approximately 85 percent of Catholics were first- or second-generation immigrants, with the largest groups coming from southern Europe, Latin America, and Poland. Within the Stockholm Catholic Diocese, the Armenian, Chaldean, Maronite, Melchite, and Syrian churches celebrated Mass in their respective languages, as did the Polish, Croatian, Spanish, Italian, Eritrean, Vietnamese, Korean, and Ukrainian communities.

The Orthodox Church had approximately 100,000 practicing members. The main national Orthodox churches were Syrian, Serbian, Greek, Romanian, and Macedonian.

There was a large Finnish-speaking Lutheran denomination.

While weekly services in Christian houses of worship generally were poorly attended, a large number of persons observed major festivals of the ecclesiastical year and preferred religious ceremonies to mark turning points in life such as weddings and funerals.

Those who attended Protestant churches, other than the Church of Sweden, totaled more than 400,000. The Pentecostal movement and the Missionary (or Missions) Church were the largest Protestant groups outside of the Church of Sweden. In 2005, the Pentecostal movement had 86,669 registered members, a figure reflecting a steady decline from a peak of more than 100,000 in 1985. The Missionary Church had 64,251 registered members in 2002, the latest year for which statistics were available.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) had approximately 9,000 members. Jehovah's Witnesses counted approximately 23,000 members.

The total number of Jews living in the country is estimated to be 18,500-20,000; however, the Jewish community estimates 10,000 active, or practicing, members. There are Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jewish synagogues, found mostly in the cities. Large numbers of Jews attend High Holy Day services, but attendance at weekly services is low.

The major religious communities and the Church of Sweden were spread across the country. Large numbers of immigrants in recent decades have introduced various religions to the country, such as Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and a number of Christian denominations in those communities populated by immigrants. These communities tended to be concentrated in the larger cities.

Buddhists numbered approximately 15,000; Hindus numbered between 7,000 and 10,000. There were estimated to be just over 1,000 Sikhs and approximately 500 Zoroastrians. Reliable statistics on the number of atheists were not available; however, past estimates placed the figure at 15 to 20 percent of the adult population.

The exact number of Muslims was difficult to estimate. However, it has increased rapidly through immigration in the past several years. The

number provided by the Muslim community was approximately 350,000, of whom an estimated 100,000 were reportedly active. Muslim affiliations among immigrant groups were predominantly with the Shi'a and Sunni branches of Islam. There were mosques in many parts of the country.

A significant number of smaller, internationally active religious groups have also been established in the country. Such groups included the Church of Scientology (approximately 3,000 members), Landmark-Forum, Hare Krishna, Word of Faith, and the Unification Church.

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 rights and freedoms enumerated in the constitution include the rights to practice one's religion and protection of religious freedom. The laws concerning religious freedoms are generally observed and enforced at all government levels and by the courts in a non-discriminatory fashion. Legal protections cover discrimination or persecution by private actors.

Since the separation of church and state in 2000, eight recognized religious denominations, in addition to the Church of Sweden, raise revenues through member-contributions made through the national tax system. All recognized denominations are entitled to direct government financial support, contributions made through the national tax system, or a mix of both. The state does not favor the Church of Sweden at the expense of other religious groups in any noticeable way. Since the population is predominantly Christian, certain Christian religious holy days are national holidays, but this does not appear to affect other religious groups negatively. School students from minority religious backgrounds are entitled to take relevant religious holidays.

No recognition or registration is required to carry out religious activity. Religious groups that want to receive government aid may apply for it. The Government considers the number of members in the group and its length of establishment, but applies no specific criteria.

Religious education covering all major world religions is compulsory in public schools. Parents may send their children to independent religious schools, all of which receive government subsidies, provided they adhere to government guidelines on core academic curriculum.

The Office of the Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination investigates claims of discrimination "due to race, skin color, national or ethnic origin, or religion." Discrimination on religious grounds is illegal, including discrimination in the work place and in the provision of public and private services.

In May 2006, the National School Authority ruled that a public school in the city of Umea had acted improperly for expelling a Muslim student for wearing a head scarf. The ruling enables Muslim students to wear head scarves in school.

Following a 1998 public opinion poll that showed a low percentage of Swedish schoolchildren had even basic knowledge of the Holocaust, the Government launched nationwide Holocaust education projects. Approximately one million copies of the projects' core textbook are in circulation and available in many languages, at no cost, to every household with children.

The Living History Forum—a government organization established in 2003 to promote tolerance, democracy and human rights using the Holocaust as a starting point—and the Swedish Committee against anti-Semitism initiated an ongoing educational program on the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and racism. Designed for teachers and others working in education, the program aims to establish a network of well-educated and engaged individuals who can spread knowledge of the Holocaust.

The Government promotes interfaith understanding and meets annually with representatives from various religious groups. The Commission for State Grants to Religious Communities is a government body consisting of twenty-two registered religious groups (thirty-seven including sub-groups) entitled to government aid.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

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

The law requires animal slaughter to be preceded by the administration of anesthetics to minimize undue suffering by the animal. The Jewish community has protested that this prevents the practice of kosher slaughter in the country, requiring kosher meat to be imported. The Muslim community appeared to be split between those who believed certain anesthetic methods do not conflict with halal requirements, and those who believed that they do. A government investigation of the law was scheduled to present its results by April 30, 2007.

The law stipulates that male circumcision may be performed only by a licensed doctor or, in the case of boys under the age of two months, in the presence of a person certified by the National Board of Health. Approximately 3,000 Muslim boys and forty to fifty Jewish boys are circumcised each year. The National Board of Health has certified Jewish mohels (persons ordained to carry out circumcision according to the Jewish faith) to carry out the operations, but a medical doctor or an anesthesia nurse must accompany them. Some members of the Jewish and Muslim communities have protested against the law on the grounds that it interferes with their religious traditions. The National Board of Health and Welfare Authority reviewed the law and recommended its continued usage.

Individuals serving in the military are given the time and opportunity to fulfill religious requirements. The military makes available food options fulfilling religious dietary requirements and allows time for appropriate mourning periods. Some regiments have an imam attached to them to facilitate religious observance by Muslim soldiers. Jehovah's Witnesses are exempt from national military service.

Armed forces guidelines allow the wearing of religious headwear. In 2005, a Sikh finished his military service, throughout which he wore a turban. In March 2006, the National Police Board incorporated in its diversity guidelines the right of police officers to wear religious headwear.

In June 2005, the country's newspaper Svenska Dagbladet reported that the ombudsman against ethnic discrimination was suing Gothenburg city for two instances in which Muslim women were turned away at a swimming pool because they were wearing arm-length tops. Pool employees maintained the clothing violated pool regulations. One of the women believed that she was turned away because she was wearing a veil. The ombudsman subsequently filed a lawsuit against the City of Gothenburg; a court hearing had not taken place by the end of the period covered by this report.

In July 2004, Pentecostal Pastor Ake Green was convicted and sentenced to one month's imprisonment under a hate-speech law that criminalizes agitation against ethnic groups. Green's conviction resulted from a sermon in which he condemned homosexuality, in part on the basis of biblical teachings. Green challenged the verdict on the basis of freedom of speech and, in February 2005, an appeals court ruled in Green's favor and overturned the conviction. The Government then appealed the February decision to the Supreme Court, which in November acquitted Green on the basis of Articles 9 (freedom of religion) and 10 (freedom of expression) of the European Convention on Human Rights.

In April 2005, a district court in Stenungsund sentenced Leif Liljestrom to two months' imprisonment for violation of the hate-speech law and for violation of a website content law. The individual had posted on a Christian website material judged to be offensive toward homosexuals. Liljestrom appealed the conviction, arguing that the online content reflected his Christian convictions. In April 2006, an appeals court in Gothenburg acquitted Liljestrom of the hate-speech and website content charges, but found him guilty of being an accomplice to hate-speech for allowing third parties to post offensive material on his website. The appeals court sentenced Liljestrom to one month's imprisonment. Liljestrom filed an appeal to the Gothenburg court decision; the Supreme Court had not yet decided on whether to accept the case by the end of the reporting period.

Three trade unions and the Employers' Association agreed in April 2005 on compensatory holiday leave hours that will allow non-Christians to substitute their religious holy days for Christian holy days that are also national holidays.

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 have 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

In November 2005, Swedish Radio revealed that the bookshop in the Stockholm Central Mosque was selling audio cassettes with anti-Semitic content. One tape included calls for Muslims to kill Jews. Police subsequently seized a number of tapes and compact disks from the mosque. The material contained highly anti-Semitic content, including calls for a holy war against Jews in which suicide bombers are celebrated as martyrs. In January 2006, the chancellor of justice, a civil servant who serves as a government legal advisor, issued an opinion that the contents of the tapes and compact disks did not constitute hate speech under Swedish law. The hate-speech law provides as follows: "A person who, in a disseminated statement or communication, threatens or expresses contempt for a national, ethnic, or other group of persons with allusion to race, color, national or ethnic origin, religious belief, or sexual orientation shall be sentenced for agitation against such a group to imprisonment for at most two years or, if the crime is petty, to a fine." The chancellor of justice opined that, in light of the broader Middle East conflict, such language could be interpreted as applying to the broader conflict and not to groups within the country per se, and hence did not violate the law.

The Jewish Congregation of Stockholm reported the desecration of approximately ten gravestones in the Jewish Cemetery in Stockholm in August 2005. The Congregation also reported that approximately fifty Jews and individuals with Jewish-sounding last names received letters with anti-Semitic content during the September-October period.

In June 2006, a court convicted three high school students for violation of the country's hate-speech law for making Nazi salutes in front of teachers and fellow students. The court sentenced two of those convicted to fines and the third to social counseling.

The number of reported anti-Semitic crimes has increased since the end of the 1990s, and averaged approximately 130 annually during the period 2000-2003, with 128 crimes reported in 2003. In 2004, the number of anti-Semitic crimes rose by 44 percent, an increase in police attribute largely to a change in statistical methodology. The largest single category of anti-Semitic crime in 2004 was agitation against an ethnic group, with sixty-six reported incidents, and unlawful threat/molestation second, with forty-two reported incidents. There were seven reported cases of assault during the same period. This means that the number of assaults more than doubled compared to 2003, when three assaults were reported. Nazi symbolism, such as Hitler salutes and the use of swastikas, was associated with 27 percent of reported anti-Semitic crimes. Some Jews believed that increases in attacks were directly linked to increased tensions in the Middle East. Since the beginning of the second Palestinian intifada in 2000, some in the Jewish community saw its primary threats as coming from Islamists and leftist extremists, as opposed to the traditional neo-Nazi threat. Representatives of the Jewish community organizations in the country

believed that it was unfair that they were obliged to bear costs for security measures, as they believed that the state should guarantee the security of its citizens.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom. Citizens were generally tolerant of diverse religious practitioners. However, anti-Semitism existed, and Muslims were subject to societal discrimination. Law enforcement authorities maintained statistics on hate crimes but did not break the figures down by categories relating to the targeting of specific religious groups, with the exception of anti-Semitic attacks. There were inadequate figures on incidents or crimes motivated by religious prejudice or intolerance toward members of the Muslim community. The Office of the Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination received reports of discrimination on religious grounds, including religious affiliation, during the period covered by this report. Exact statistics were not available.

In October 2004, the Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention and the Living History Forum together presented a report on intolerance towards Muslims and Jews among high school students. In March 2006, both organizations released their follow-up report on anti-Semitism among the population as a whole. Five percent of individuals questioned for the report, and 39 percent of those questioned who identified themselves as Muslims, indicated strong anti-Semitic views; 36 percent of all respondents indicated an ambivalent view towards Jewish people.

In November 2005, Swedish Radio (SR) reported that four of ten Islamic organizations in the country believe they had been threatened, according to an investigation by an SR news program which interviewed 100 organizations that together represented 80 thousand Muslims. The report stated that three of ten organizations had been attacked, vandalized, and damaged. Abuses ranged from graffiti to attacks with fire bombs.

The Jehovah's Witnesses and members of various smaller Christian churches reported incidents of discrimination during the past few years.

In September and October 2005, unidentified individuals carried out arson attacks at the Islamic Center in Malmo. The attacks did not result in extensive damage, unlike the serious arson attack against the center that occurred in 2003.

In May 2006, two masked individuals stabbed a Sunni Muslim imam in the city of Gavle. The imam sustained a chest wound. Authorities were investigating the case but had made no arrests by the end of the period covered by this report.

Many religious communities are involved in interfaith dialogue. However, in May 2004, the Jewish central council decided that the Jewish community should withdraw from official cooperation with the Church of Sweden after the launch of the Church's HOPP (HOPE) campaign for a just peace in the Middle East. Archbishop KG Hammar endorsed the campaign, which included a recommendation to boycott Israeli goods originating from occupied territory. Cooperation was likely to resume following the June 2006 appointment of a new archbishop, who signaled his intent for the Church to play a less political role.

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. government is a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research.

The embassy maintained regular contacts with local religious leaders, and embassy officials have participated in events promoting interfaith understanding and religious tolerance. The embassy also nominated individuals to participate in International Visitor programs on religious diversity.

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