



Sweden

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.

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 some reports of societal abuses and 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 173,732 square miles and a population of 9.1 million. Approximately 77 percent of the population belongs to the Church of Sweden. More of people have left the Church of Sweden each year since it separated from the state in 2000. During 2006, 59,302 persons left the church, 0.9 percent of the members. Church of Sweden studies found that individuals left primarily for economic reasons; membership carries a tax of 1.19 percent of members' incomes. In 2005 the Church of Sweden baptized 67.7 percent of all children, a figure that has steadily declined over the past two decades. Confirmations declined more sharply; according to the latest available figures, less than 36.5 percent of 15-year-olds were confirmed in 2005, as opposed to 80 percent in 1970.

There are an estimated 140,000 Roman Catholics, of whom 83,528 are registered with the Roman Catholic Church. Approximately 85 percent of Catholics are 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 celebrate Mass in their respective languages, as do the Polish, Croatian, Spanish, Italian, Eritrean, Vietnamese, Korean, and Ukrainian communities.

The Orthodox Christian Church has approximately 107,000 practicing members. The main national Orthodox churches are Syrian, Serbian, Greek, Romanian, and Macedonian.

There is a large Finnish-speaking Lutheran denomination.

While weekly services in Christian churches generally are poorly attended, many persons observe major church festivals and prefer religious ceremonies to mark turning points in life such as weddings and funerals.

More than 400,000 persons attend Protestant churches other than the Church of Sweden. The Pentecostal movement and the Missionary (or Missions) Church are the largest Protestant groups outside of the Church of Sweden. In 2005, according to the latest available figures, the Pentecostal movement had 86,669 registered members, down from a peak of more than 100,000 in 1985. The Missionary Church had 62,565 registered members in 2004, the latest year for which statistics were available. Evangelical churches have an estimated membership of 31,000, a figure that reportedly is slowly increasing in number.

Jehovah's Witnesses count approximately 22,500 members. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) has an estimated 9,000 members.

The number of Jews is estimated to be 18,500 to 20,000. The Jewish community estimates 9,500 are 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 are spread across the country. Large numbers of immigrants in recent decades have introduced various religious faiths, including Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and a number of Christian denominations. These communities are concentrated in the larger cities.

Buddhists number approximately 15,000, Hindus 7,000 to 10,000, Sikhs slightly more than 1,000, and Zoroastrians 500.

Reliable statistics on the number of atheists are not available; however, estimates placed the figure at 10 to 20 percent of the adult population. Other estimates range upwards from 46 percent.

The Muslim population grew substantially over the past 60 years. It increased from a few individuals prior to 1950, to approximately 100,000 by the end of the 1980s, and 400,000 to 450,000 today. According to the Muslim community, an estimated 100,000 Muslims are religiously active. There are mosques in many parts of the country.

Several smaller, internationally active religious groups are also established in the country. Such groups include the Church of Scientology (approximately 3,000 members), 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 right to practice one's religion and the protection of religious freedom. The laws concerning religious freedoms are generally observed and enforced at all government levels and by the courts in a nondiscriminatory fashion. Legal protections cover discrimination or persecution by private actors.

Hate-speech laws seek to prohibit threats or expressions of contempt for people based on several factors, including religious belief.

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. These include the Swedish Missionary Church, Roman Catholic Church, Swedish Alliance Mission, Baptist Union of Sweden, Salvation Army, Methodist Church in Sweden, Pentecostal Church, and the Evangelist Church. 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 over other religious groups.

Certain Christian holy days are national holidays. Students from minority religious backgrounds may observe their 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. In reviewing such applications, the Government considers the number of members in the group and its length of establishment, but applies no other criteria. 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 under the authority of the Ministry of Culture. Twenty-two registered religious groups (39 including sub-groups) are entitled to government aid.

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 Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination (DO) is an independent government authority. The objective of the DO is to ensure that discrimination relating to ethnic origin, religion, or other belief does not occur. To that end, it has three principal duties: To educate against discrimination; to assist individuals exposed to discrimination; and to supervise employers, institutes of higher education, and other schools to ensure that they fulfill relevant requirements of the law and combat discrimination through targeted and proactive measures.

The Living History Forum--a government authority established in 2003 to promote tolerance, democracy, and human rights using the Holocaust as a starting point--promotes national educational programs on the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and racism. In 2006 the forum initiated an educational exhibition project, "Sweden and the Holocaust," that toured nationwide. The forum also conducted an educational campaign entitled "Anne Frank & I," which targeted high school students.

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 stunning and/or the administration of anesthetics to minimize suffering by the animal. Some members of the Jewish community have protested that this prevents 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. In April 2006 the Animal Protection Authority issued a government-commissioned report on animal slaughter and recommended the current law be maintained.

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 and Welfare (NBHW). The NBHW has certified mohels (persons ordained to carry out circumcision according to the Jewish faith) to perform the operations but requires that a medical doctor or an anesthesiologist 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.

In 2006 the NBHW evaluated male circumcision in the country. The NBHW reported that each year approximately 3,000 circumcisions are performed; only an estimated one-third are performed legally.

Individuals serving in the military are given the opportunity to fulfill religious requirements. The military offers food options complying with religious dietary requirements and allows time off 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 February 2007 the city of Stockholm denied a Muslim woman employment as a nurse at a home for the elderly because she wore a head scarf. The woman filed a complaint with the DO. In an out-of-court settlement, the city paid the woman approximately \$4,000 (28,000 Swedish kronas) in compensation.

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

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 newspaper Svenska Dagbladet reported that the DO was suing the city of Gothenburg 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. The district court ruled that the responsible person at the pool had not violated discrimination laws but had upheld security regulations.

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

Since 2000 approximately 130 anti-Semitic crimes have been reported annually. In 2004 the number rose to 151. However, the increase was attributed largely to a change in statistical methodology. In 2005 the number of reported cases decreased to 111, and in 2006 there were 134 reported cases.

The most frequent anti-Semitic crime was "agitation against an ethnic group," with 48 reported incidents in 2006. The second most frequent type of incident was "unlawful threat or molestation," with 35 reported cases that year. Nazi symbols, such as Hitler salutes and the use of swastikas, were associated with 32 percent of reported anti-Semitic crimes.

The openly Nazi organization National Socialist Front Party (NSF) participated in the September 2006 elections on both regional and national levels. The party gained 1,417 votes nationally, representing about 0.03 percent of the electorate. In 2006 media reported that individuals associated with the NSF committed discriminatory acts. These included one case of serious assault, incidents of hate speech, unauthorized demonstrations, illegal distribution of posters, illegal possession of weapons, and disorderly conduct.

The Jewish Congregation of Stockholm reported that approximately 50 Jews and individuals with Jewish-sounding last names had received letters with anti-Semitic content during the September-October 2006 period; they were thought to be related to the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict in Lebanon. During the period, Jewish congregations noticed an increase in the number of attacks and threat messages with anti-Semitic content. According to the nongovernmental organization EXPO, anti-Semitic content increased on neo-Nazi websites during this time.

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 the 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 claimed 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 10 gravestones in the Jewish cemetery in Stockholm in August 2005. Police investigated but later dropped the case due to lack of evidence.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice. Citizens were generally tolerant of diverse religious practices. 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 religious group, with the exception of anti-Semitic incidents. Anti-Muslim incidents appeared to have increased over the past few years. There also was a significant incidence of strong anti-Semitic views among resident Muslims.

In May 2007 a supermarket in Frolunda (western region) denied employment to a Muslim woman because she wore a head scarf. The woman filed a complaint with the DO. In an out-of-court settlement, the supermarket paid the woman approximately \$11,000 (76,000 Swedish krona) in compensation. It now allows employees to wear head scarves.

In April 2007 the Scandic Hotel chain (the largest hotel operator in the Nordic region) removed all Bibles from its hotel rooms after a guest complained that the presence of a Bible constituted religious discrimination. A media debate ensued, leading Scandic to reintroduce the Bible together with the Qur'an and the Tanach in all hotel rooms.

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

In May 2006 two masked individuals stabbed a Sunni Muslim imam in the chest in the city of Gavle. Authorities opened an investigation but made no arrests, and in June 2007 police closed the case due to lack of evidence.

In February 2006 an amusement park in Gothenburg denied employment to a Muslim woman on grounds that the wearing of a head scarf violated the employee dress code. She filed a complaint with the DO. In an out-of-court settlement, the park paid the woman \$1,500 (10,000 Swedish kronas) and offered her employment. The park's employee dress code now allows employees to wear head scarves.

In April 2006 an appeals court in Gothenburg acquitted Lief Liljestrom of hate-speech and website content charges for which he was sentenced in April 2005; however, the court found him guilty of being an accomplice to hate speech for

allowing third parties to post offensive material on his website. Liljestrom had posted material judged to be offensive toward homosexuals. Liljestrom appealed the lower court conviction, arguing that the online content reflected his Christian convictions. The appeals court sentenced Liljestrom to one month's imprisonment. He subsequently appealed to the Supreme Court, which in December 2006 agreed to hear his case. A hearing date had not been set by the end of the reporting period.

In September and October 2005 unidentified individuals carried out arson attacks at the Islamic Center in Malmo.

In November 2005 Swedish Radio (SR) reported that 4 of 10 Islamic organizations in the country believed they had been threatened, according to an investigation by an SR news program which interviewed 100 organizations. The report stated that 3 of 10 organizations had had property vandalized. Abuses ranged from graffiti to attacks with fire bombs.

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

In November 2006 the two organizations issued an additional follow-up report on Islamophobia. The report observed an increased societal awareness of Islam and Muslims in the country. It found that public discussions on Islam were frequent and often involved questions such as female genital mutilation, male circumcision, ritual animal slaughter, religious private schools, the wearing of religious garments in public places, Shari'a, so-called "honor" violence, and government permission for the construction of mosques. The report stated that one-third of respondents exhibited a bias against Muslims.

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 U.S. Embassy maintained regular contact with local religious leaders, and embassy officials participated in events promoting interfaith understanding and religious tolerance.

Released on September 14, 2007

[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)