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Switzerland

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

July-December, 2010 International Religious Freedom Report

Report

September 13, 2011

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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.

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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 15,937 square miles and a population of 7.6 million.

Three-quarters of the population nominally belong to either the Roman Catholic or the Protestant churches, and although actual church attendance rates are much lower, 80 percent say they are religious. Of this group, 22 percent acknowledged being "very religious," according to a 2007 Religion Monitor survey sponsored by the Bertelsmann Foundation.

The arrival of immigrants has contributed to the noticeable growth of religious communities that had little presence in the past. The 2000 census notes membership in religious denominations as follows: 41.8 percent Roman Catholic; 35.3 percent Protestant; 4.3 percent Muslim; 1.8 percent Christian Orthodox; and 11.1 percent professed no formal creed. Religious groups that constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Old Catholics, other Christian denominations, Buddhists, Hindus, and Jews.

The majority of Muslims originate from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Albania, followed by Turkey and North African and other Arab countries. Muslim immigrants from southeastern Europe typically settle in the German-speaking eastern and central regions, whereas those arriving from North African and other Arab countries commonly relocate to the French-speaking western region. The majority are Sunni Muslims; there are also Shia and Alawites. Approximately 10 to 15 percent of Muslims are practicing believers. The country has two large mosques, in Geneva and Zurich, and approximately 120 official prayer rooms. An estimated additional 100 prayer rooms exist, many of them belonging to Albanian, Turkish, or Arab communities.

Approximately 75 percent of Jewish households are located in Zurich, Geneva, Basel, and Bern.

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 for freedom of creed and conscience, and the federal penal code prohibits any form of debasement of or discrimination against any religion or any religious adherents.

The law penalizes public incitement to racial hatred or discrimination, spreading racist ideology, and denying crimes against humanity. There have been convictions under this legislation for anti-Semitism and historical revisionism, including Holocaust denial.

The government's Federal Service for Combating Racism continued to support antiracism activities with funding from the regular federal budget. In 2009 it supported 59 projects with a total of 871,470 Swiss francs (\$801,720). Projects included the creation of a history lesson sequence for schools on anti-Semitism during the 20th century. It also financed special sensitization workshops for the territorial military police.

There is no official state church; religious matters are handled by the cantons according to the constitution. Most of the 26 cantons (with the exception of Geneva and Neuchatel, where church and state are separate) financially support at least one of the three traditional religious communities – Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, or Protestant – with funds collected through taxation. Each canton observes its own regulations regarding the relationship between church and state. In some cantons the church tax is voluntary, but in others an individual who chooses not to contribute to the church tax may have to leave the church formally. In some cantons private companies are unable to avoid payment of the church tax. Some cantons also allow church tax to be collected on behalf of the Jewish community. Islamic and other nontraditional religious groups are excluded from these benefits.

A religious organization must register with the government in order to receive tax-exempt status.

Although groups of foreign origin are free to proselytize, the government is implementing new regulations that restrict this right. Foreign missionaries must obtain a "religious worker" visa to work in the country. Visa requirements include proof that the foreigner would not displace a citizen from doing the job, has formally completed theological training, and would be supported financially by the host organization. The courts have ruled that certain denominations, such as representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, do not meet these provisions. The government has imposed quotas limiting the entry of "religious workers" of these denominations for 2010 and 2011 and has informed the

denominations it will not admit any "religious workers" of these denominations effective 2012. The host organization must also acknowledge the country's legal order and not tolerate its abuse by members.

The Federal Law on Foreigners requires mandatory training for immigrant clerics in order to facilitate their integration into society. Among other provisions, the training program aims to ensure that immigrant clerics can speak at least one of the three main national languages.

Education policy is set at the cantonal level, but school authorities at the county level wield some discretionary power in its implementation. Most public cantonal schools offer religious education, with the exception of schools in Geneva and Neuchatel. Classes in Catholic and Protestant doctrines are normally offered; some schools also provide instruction on other religious groups in the country. Since 2002 two municipalities have offered religious classes in Islamic doctrine in the canton of Lucerne. In some cantons religious classes are voluntary, while in others they form part of the mandatory curriculum; however, waivers are routinely granted for children whose parents request them. Those of different religious groups are free to attend classes for their own creeds during the class period. Parents may also send their children to private religious schools and to classes offered by religious groups, or they may teach their children at home.

A number of cantons have reformed religious education in public schools to either complement or entirely supplant traditional classes in Christian doctrines with nonconfessional teachings about religion and culture. In virtually all cantons contemplating or implementing reform, authorities planned to make the nonconfessional teachings about religion and culture a nonelective part of the curriculum for all pupils.

There are no national guidelines for waivers on religious grounds from classes other than confessional instruction, and practices vary. Some cantons have issued guidelines not to excuse pupils from swimming or physical education classes.

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Good Friday, Easter, Easter Monday, Ascension, Whit Sunday, Whit Monday, Christmas Day, and St. Stephen's Day. Sunday is a public holiday; shops remain closed, and Sunday work is generally not allowed.

In a November 2009 referendum, 57.5 percent of voters approved a constitutional amendment banning the construction of minarets throughout the country. The binding referendum passed despite opposition to it by majorities in both parliament and the Federal Council and public statements by many of the country's leaders describing such a ban as contradicting basic values in the country's constitution and violating its international obligations. This amendment had no effect on the four existing minarets in Geneva, Zurich, Winterthur, and Wangen or on building or worshipping in mosques.

On June 23, the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, including its five Swiss members, adopted a recommendation calling on the government to repeal the ban on minarets on the basis that it discriminates against Muslims.

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 period. However, there were some restrictions at the local level.

Immigration authorities refused residency permits to imams considered "fundamentalists."

Resident Islamic organizations complained that authorities in many cantons and municipalities discriminated against them by refusing zoning approval to build mosques or establish Muslim cemeteries.

The Law on the Protection of Animals prevents local ritual slaughter for kosher and halal meat; however, importation of such meat remains legal and available.

On August 5, the canton of St. Gallen asked local municipalities to ban the wearing of headdresses in schools. The Federal Commission against Racism criticized the ban as discriminatory. The school council of the municipality of Bad Ragaz followed the recommendation of the canton. A 15-year-old Muslim girl filed a complaint over the ban with the regional education authority, leading the school to revoke the ban.

On September 22, the construction authority of the canton of Bern rejected an appeal by the municipal council of Langenthal against the construction of a minaret, stating that the project had been approved before the adoption of the ban on minarets in November 2009.

On October 8, school authorities in Stalden dismissed a teacher who had refused to teach in classrooms with a crucifix on the wall. Another school in Triengen decided on October 15 to replace crucifixes with simple stone crosses following a complaint by the father of two students.

On November 2, the cantonal parliament of Aargau rejected an initiative calling for a ban on wearing burqas (the Muslim full body covering), which had been submitted by a member of parliament on May 4. The initiative started a nationwide debate on banning the use of burqas.

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

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In response to a growing number of soldiers of Muslim faith, the army has drawn up guidelines affording special conditions for meals and prayers for its Muslim personnel.

On November 9, the municipal authorities of Winterthur decided to spend 1.5 million Swiss francs (\$1.44 million) for the construction of a Muslim cemetery.

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

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Such incidents were mostly directed against Muslim and Jewish minorities.

According to statistics gathered by the Foundation against Racism and Anti-Semitism, there were 66 reported incidents against foreigners or minorities in 2009, a decrease from 93 in 2008. These figures included instances of spoken and written attacks, which were much more frequent than physical assaults.

During 2009 the Intercommunity Center for Coordination against Anti-Semitism and Defamation (CICAD) recorded 153 anti-Semitic incidents in the western, French-speaking area, ranging from spoken and written attacks to offensive graffiti and vandalizing Jewish property, compared with 96 in 2008. Additionally, the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities recorded 28 anti-Semitic incidents in the German-speaking region, compared with 21 incidents in 2008. Approximately one-third of these incidents involved vandalism and graffiti; one-fifth included threats and harassment; and almost one-third were verbal attacks. Throughout the year, several Swiss cities reported swastika graffiti, and Jewish organizations and individuals received anti-Semitic leaflets.

The Federal Commission against Racism expressed concern that the adoption in November 2009 of the initiative to ban minarets might have created a general anti-Muslim climate within the country. The commission reported an increase in verbal and written attacks against Muslims.

On November 5, three Hindu fundamentalists tried to burn Bibles and Korans on the square in front of the parliament building in Bern. The police arrested the men before they were able to carry out their plan. News reports stated police opened an investigation and released the three individuals the next day.

On November 26, a truck driver verbally and physically attacked a Muslim woman wearing a hijab (a Muslim head covering) at a gas station in Netstal. Police were investigating at the end of the reporting period.

On November 29, a self-appointed public citizens' committee, which had submitted the initiative for a ban on minarets, published a manifesto calling for further restrictions on Muslim immigrants, such as a ban on specifically Muslim cemeteries.

Many nongovernmental organizations coordinated interfaith events to promote tolerance throughout the country.

From October 31 to November 6, religious communities in approximately 40 cities across the country joined to celebrate a "Week of Religions" under the motto "Getting to Know Each Other." For a week, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Bahais invited each other to attend their religious services and held a series of special events such as music concerts, panel discussions, round table meetings, and open discussion forums.

Jewish leaders reported they organized an annual awareness-raising trip to Auschwitz, Poland, for teachers and students that had a positive multiplier effect in classrooms.

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.

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