

NORWAY 2016 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the right to choose and practice or change one's religion. A hate crime law punishes some expressions of disrespect for religious beliefs. The government presented an action plan against anti-Semitism which includes anti-Semitism as a separate category of hate crime in police statistics. The government returned to their Pentecostal parents five children of whom it had taken custody in 2015 on abuse charges for spanking, which the parents had said were based on religious bias. The government provided security at Jewish facilities in Oslo and funded programs to combat anti-Semitism and increase religious tolerance. The government proceeded with the transition of the Church of Norway, an evangelical Lutheran Church, from state church to self-standing entity, while continuing to provide certain benefits solely to that church. The government also provided financial support to other religious and humanist communities. In October the government released an action plan, developed with the Jewish Community (DMT), the country's largest Jewish organization, other religious groups, and civil society, to combat anti-Semitism. The Ministry of Culture (MOC) provided funding to a number of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), religious umbrella organizations, and individual religious and humanist or "life-stance" organizations to sponsor programs to combat anti-Semitism, increase interfaith dialogue and cooperation, or promote freedom of religion or belief.

In 2015, the most recent year for which data were available, police reported 79 hate crimes categorized as religiously motivated. The Oslo Police District reported that most of the religiously-motivated hate crime incidents in their district, the majority of which consisted of assault and hate speech, targeted Muslims. The DMT voiced concern about continued anti-Semitic attitudes it said were primarily evident online and on social media.

U.S. embassy staff met with officials from the MOC for updates on the process of separating the Church of Norway from the government and to discuss the ministry's role in supporting religious umbrella organizations and activities to promote interreligious dialogue. Embassy representatives also met with faith groups and NGOs to discuss religious freedom. The embassy hosted religious celebrations with members of different faith communities, government officials, and NGOs to promote religious tolerance and understanding.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.2 million (July 2016 estimate). The National Statistics Bureau estimates 72.9 percent of the population belongs to the Church of Norway.

The National Statistics Bureau reports Christian denominations other than the Church of Norway have 349,000 registered members, 6.7 percent of the population. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest of these other Christian groups, with 145,000 registered members. Pentecostal congregations have approximately 39,000 registered members. Membership in Muslim congregations is 2.8 percent of the population or 149,000. Muslims are located throughout the country, but the population is concentrated in the Oslo region. Jewish congregations have approximately 770 registered members. There are two official Jewish congregations, one in Oslo and one in Trondheim. Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus together constitute 5 percent of registered members of religious groups.

The Norwegian Humanist Association is the largest life-stance organization. It has a registered membership of 87,000, which accounts for nearly all those registered with life-stance organizations.

Immigrants make up the majority of members of religious groups outside the Church of Norway. Immigrants from Poland and the Philippines have increased Roman Catholic Church membership. Immigrants from Muslim countries, including Iraq, Pakistan, and Somalia, have increased the size of the Muslim community. All of these groups have greater representation in cities than in rural areas.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution states all individuals shall have the right to free exercise of their religion, and all religious and philosophical communities should be supported on equal terms. The constitution also states “the King shall at all times profess the Evangelical-Lutheran religion,” and that national values shall remain anchored in the country’s Christian and humanistic heritage. The law further specifies the right of individuals to choose or change their religion. Any person over the age of 15 years has the right to join or leave a religious community. Parents have the right to decide their child’s religion before age 15, but must take into consideration the

views of children once they reach the age of seven, and must give their views priority once they reach the age of 12.

A constitutional amendment separates the Church of Norway from the state, although the state continues to provide direct financial support for the Church in its budget. The government does not appoint bishops, priests, or clerks of the Church, but laws regulate clerical salaries, and the government covers the cost of salaries, benefits, and pension plans of Church employees. Church of Norway staff remain public employees until January 1, 2017.

The penal code specifies penalties for discrimination on the basis of religion and for expressions of disrespect for religious beliefs or members of religious groups. In practice, penalties for disrespect for religious beliefs are only applied in cases of incitement to violence. The penalties may include a fine or imprisonment of up to six months.

The government provides financial support to all registered religious and life-stance organizations (currently nearly 800 organizations) based on the number of members reported to the government. In order to register, a faith or life-stance organization must notify the county governor and provide its creed and doctrine, activities, names of board members, names and responsibilities of group leaders, operating rules – including who may become a member – voting rights, the process for amending statutes, and the process for dissolution. A group registers only once in one county but reports its national tally of members. If a religious group does not register, it will not receive financial support from the government, but there are no restrictions on the organization's activity.

The ombudsman for equality and antidiscrimination is charged with reviewing cases of religious discrimination. Anyone may file a complaint with the ombudsman. The ombudsman publishes non-binding findings, which provide the basis for legal investigations and follow-up, in response to complaints that a person or organization has violated a law or regulation within the ombudsman's mandate. The ombudsman also provides advice and guidance on antidiscrimination law.

Public schools include a mandatory course on Christian Knowledge and Religious and Ethical Information (CKREE) for grades one through 10 (generally ages six to 16). CKREE is taught by teachers employed by the state and covers world religions and philosophies while promoting tolerance and respect for all religious beliefs, as well as for atheism. Up to 50 percent of the CKREE course content is devoted to Christianity. Students may not opt out of this course. Religious

ceremonies are not permitted in schools, but schools may organize religious outings, such as attending Christmas services. Parents may request their children be exempted from participating in or performing specific religious acts, such as a class trip to a church. The parents need not give a reason for requesting an exemption.

Individuals may apply for a full exemption for religious reasons from the required registration for a year of military service.

According to the law, the slaughter of an animal must be preceded by stunning or administering anesthetics, making traditional kosher and halal slaughter practices illegal. Halal and kosher meat may be imported. The Islamic Council in Norway certifies some locally produced meat as halal upon review of applications and procedures submitted by producers or distributors that demonstrate that the stunned animal's heart is still beating when slaughtered.

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

This country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

In June the government returned to their parents the five children of Pentecostal Christians Marius and Ruth Bodnariu whom the Child Welfare Service (Barnevernet) had taken custody of in November 2015 on abuse charges for spanking, which is illegal. According to the family's attorney, the Bodnariu admitted to spanking their children, but said the seizure was based on the anti-religious bias of the Barnevernet, which they said characterized their "Bible-based parenting style" as inhibiting their children's development. After the children were returned to the parents, the abuse case remained pending, but the family left the country for Romania before it came up for trial.

On October 2, the government released an 11-point action plan to counter anti-Semitism in society. Representatives from a wide range of government ministries, the DMT, non-Jewish religious groups, and the Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities (HC) participated in the working group to develop the plan. The plan emphasized training and education programs, research on anti-Semitism and Jewish life in the country, and efforts to safeguard Jewish culture. The HC and the DMT were generally positive about the plan, highlighting as

particularly important the inclusion of anti-Semitism as a separate category of hate crime in police statistics and institutionalization of a survey of anti-Semitic attitudes in the country to be conducted every five years (next in 2017).

The Ministry of Local Government and Modernization continued to provide one million Norwegian kroner (NOK) (\$116,000) for security at the DMT facility and synagogue in Oslo, based on incidents in prior years. The DMT continued to maintain a dialogue with the Ministry of Justice and Public Security and the police aimed at ensuring the DMT's facilities were properly safeguarded.

The Church of Norway received approximately 2 billion NOK (\$232 million) in funding from the government. The government and the Church were reviewing the future status of Church employees, who would no longer be employees of the state after 2016, with regard to pensions and benefits. The government, however, planned to continue providing a large annual grant to the Church. The MOC stated the grant to the Church would initially increase after its employees were removed from the state payroll. Other registered religious and life-stance organizations would also continue to receive state grants totaling approximately 322 million NOK (\$37 million). Some representatives from these other groups, including the Norwegian Humanist Association, stated the size of the grant to the Church of Norway was not based solely on the size of membership and signaled the Church's privileged relationship with the state would last beyond the January 1, 2017 legal separation. In April the MOC began preparing a white paper on religion and life-stance policies, which remained under development at year's end.

In November the Oslo District Court fined the Catholic Diocese of Oslo 1 million NOK (\$116,000) and ordered it to begin repaying approximately 40 million NOK (\$4.63 million) in excess government subsidies. It also found the diocese's chief administrative officer guilty of fraud for inflating diocese membership numbers in order to receive extra subsidies. The diocese filed a civil suit against the government for unfair treatment in May, which remained pending at year's end. According to the diocese, it received subsidies for 80,000 Catholics in 2015, while it actually had 136,000 members.

The national police unit for combating organized and other serious crimes continued to maintain a web page for the public to contact police regarding hate crimes and hate speech, including religiously motivated incidents. According to police and NGO reports and observation, religiously motivated hate speech, particularly online, continued to be a significant problem. A new national strategy against hate speech, released in November, emphasized improving national

statistics on hate speech, including religiously-motivated speech, and associated crimes, and promoting education and research on such crimes and speech on the internet.

The government continued to ban the wearing of religious symbols, including headgear, with police uniforms.

The government continued to permit individual schools to decide whether to implement bans on religious clothing such as burqas or *niqabs*. Two university colleges, University College of Southeast Norway and Ostfold University College, maintained bans. In October some politicians, including the minister of education and research, expressed support in the media for a national ban on students wearing the burqa or *niqab* in school.

Many non-Christian religious organizations, such as the Norwegian Humanist Association, continued their objections to the specific reference to “Christian Knowledge” in the title of the mandatory school course on religion, stating it promoted Christianity over other religions.

The Ministry of Education continued grants for school programs raising awareness about anti-Semitism. Schools nationwide continued to observe Holocaust Memorial Day on January 27. High school curricula included material on the deportation and extermination of Jewish citizens from 1942 to 1945. The DMT received grants for a program where young Jews talked to high school students about Judaism and being a Jew in the country. The government indicated it planned to expand the program through the national action plan to counter anti-Semitism.

The government continued to support an extracurricular program that took some secondary school students to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in Poland and to other Nazi concentration camps to educate them about the Holocaust.

In response to the effective ban on the production of kosher and halal meat in the country by the law on animal slaughter, the Ministry of Agriculture continued to waive import duties and provide guidance on import procedures to both the Jewish and Muslim communities.

The government continued to conduct workshops and other intervention programs targeting groups at risk for radicalization and to explore strategies to increase racial and religious tolerance. In September the government sponsored a national

conference against radicalization, which included extensive participation by civil society and highlighted the country's national plan to counter violent extremism, launched in 2014. In November the ombudsman for equality and antidiscrimination sponsored a conference on combating racial discrimination and intolerance. The discussion on hate speech (which disproportionately affected religious minorities) at the conference included active participation from representatives of faith-based and religious umbrella organizations.

Consistent with previous years, the MOC provided 12 million NOK (\$1.4 million) to religious umbrella organizations such as the Islamic Council Norway, Christian Council of Norway, and the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities (STL), among others, to promote dialogue and tolerance among religious and life-stance organizations. Groups outside these religious umbrella organizations also applied to the ministry for funding for specific programming.

To support government efforts to promote religious freedom outside of the country, the government appointed a new Special Envoy for freedom of religion and belief at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in September.

The government is a member of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In 2015, the latest year for which data were available, police reported 79 religiously-motivated hate crimes throughout the country, up from 28 reported in 2014. The police attributed the sharp increase in the number of hate crime reports in 2015 to several factors, including increased attention to the subject, a better understanding of hate crimes by the population, and prioritization by police in the field to identify hate crimes. Religiously-motivated hate crimes in the Oslo Police District accounted for over half of such crimes nationally. Police officials reported that 88 percent of the 40 religiously-motivated hate crimes in 2015 in the Oslo District were targeted at Muslims. Most religiously-motivated hate crimes throughout the country consisted of assault and hate speech. Police statistics did not cite specific examples of these crimes.

The equality and discrimination ombudsman, as well as NGOs, encouraged the government to improve consistency of data collection and reporting of hate crimes, including religiously-motivated hate crimes, for police districts outside of Oslo.

The Oslo Police District's hate crime unit, which was the only such unit in the country, was held as the model for hate crime monitoring and reporting.

In 2015, there were a total of three reports of religious discrimination made to the equality and antidiscrimination ombudsman.

The NGO Antiracism Center and Organization against Public Discrimination reported ethnic minorities (many of whom were Muslim) experienced discrimination. The secretary general from the Islamic Council of Norway urged Norwegian Muslims in a media statement in November to report incidents of harassment or hatred toward them to raise awareness of discrimination. According to media reports, in September a hairdresser in Rogaland was charged with religious discrimination after denying service to a Muslim woman wearing a hijab. The hairdresser was convicted and fined 10,000 NOK (\$1,200).

The DMT expressed concern about what it viewed as a continued tolerance for anti-Semitic expression, primarily online and on social media. It stated, however, there was no evidence that anti-Semitism was increasing in the media, rather that people were simply using different platforms to express it.

The HC conducted programs against anti-Semitism with financial support from the government. The HC used instructional materials it developed in high schools nationwide to promote tolerance for religious diversity. It also screened materials used in public schools for anti-Semitic content.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy staff met with officials from the MOC who worked on religious issues. The discussions centered on the public financing mechanism for faith and life-stance organizations, including alleged financial preferences for the Church of Norway. Staff discussed the continuing processes and issues involved in fully separating the Church of Norway from the government, including the Church's employees and infrastructure. Embassy staff also discussed the ministry's role in supporting religious umbrella organizations and activities to promote interreligious dialogue. Embassy staff discussed efforts to promote religious freedom with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Special Envoy for religious freedom and belief.

The embassy hosted an Eid al-Fitr celebration with members of different faith communities, government officials, and NGOs to promote religious tolerance. In his remarks, the U.S. Ambassador stressed the importance of religious tolerance and

echoed remarks by President Obama that shared values can help bring communities together. The event served as a platform to encourage interfaith conversations with Muslim leaders and strengthen the embassy's relationship with minority religious groups.

The Ambassador visited a mosque in Oslo to engage in a discussion with Muslim community representatives on religious tolerance and interreligious dialogue.

Embassy staff engaged civil society, including NGOs such as the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and religious umbrella organizations such as the STL, throughout the year to discuss their efforts to promote religious tolerance.