

DENMARK 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year. The Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) is the state church and has some privileges not available to other religious groups.

There were some reports of societal discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice, such as anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic insults, harassment, and vandalism, primarily reflecting tensions between young Muslims and other young persons.

The U.S. embassy promoted religious dialogue, particularly with the Muslim community, and sponsored a variety of programs for public servants, leaders, and citizens promoting religious tolerance. Embassy staff worked with government and civil society to address religious freedom issues and to counteract anti-Muslim sentiment. This included public outreach events and embassy-sponsored initiatives with Muslim groups focused on the importance of religious diversity and tolerance.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to government statistics, the population is 5.6 million. The government estimates 80 percent of the population belongs to the ELC. Although reportedly fewer than 10 percent of citizens attend services once a month or more, more than 50 percent observe religious holidays or participate at least once annually in religious rituals such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals.

As a result of immigration, Muslims constitute approximately 4 percent of the population. Muslim groups are concentrated in the largest cities, particularly Copenhagen, Odense, and Aarhus. Groups constituting less than 1 percent of the population include, in descending order: Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Serbian Orthodox Christians, Jews, Baptists, Buddhists, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Pentecostals, and other non-denominational Christians. Though estimates vary, the Center for Contemporary Religion at Aarhus University places the Jewish population at 2,400.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

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Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

The constitution states that “No person can, because of his religious belief or descent, be deprived of access to the full enjoyment of civil and political rights.”

The constitution stipulates the ELC is the state church, the state supports it, and the reigning monarch must be a member of the church. The ELC is the only religious group that receives state subsidies or funding directly through the tax system. General revenues fund approximately 14 percent of the church’s budget; the balance comes from a church tax that only members pay. Among the nonreligious activities the ELC carries out are the management of nonsectarian cemeteries and the registration of civil unions, births, deaths, and other vital statistics.

The criminal code prohibits blasphemy, defined as public mockery of or insult to the doctrine or worship of a legally recognized religion. The maximum penalty for a violation of this provision is a fine and up to four months in prison, but the provision is not enforced. Prosecutors routinely dismiss alleged blasphemy as protected free speech. The law also prohibits hate speech and penalizes public statements that threaten, insult, or degrade individuals on the basis of their religion or belief.

The country mandates compulsory military service, but provides an exemption for conscientious objectors. In lieu of military service, alternative civilian service may be required.

Religious symbols, such as headscarves, turbans, skull caps, and crucifixes, are banned from judicial attire.

On June 7, the parliament voted to legalize same-sex marriage and compel churches in the ELC to carry out ceremonies for same-sex couples that are identical to heterosexual marriage celebrations. Under a new law that took effect on June 15, priests may opt out of performing the service for theological reasons, but a bishop must arrange for a replacement.

The government, through the Ministry of Justice, grants official status to other religious groups in addition to the ELC. Prior to 1970, eleven religious groups received approval in the form of recognition by royal decree, including the

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Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, Russian Orthodox, and Jewish communities. Since 1970 the Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs, responsible for the administrative work of registering religious groups, has registered a total of 133 religious groups. In addition to 83 Christian groups, there are 23 Muslim, 11 Buddhist, eight Hindu, three Jewish and five other groups, including Bahais and followers of the indigenous Norse belief system Forn Sidr. Registered religious groups have certain special rights, including the right to perform marriage ceremonies with legal effect, baptize children, obtain residence permits for foreign clergy, establish cemeteries, and receive tax exemptions.

Religious groups not recognized by either royal decree or registered by the Ecclesiastic Ministry, such as the Church of Scientology, are entitled to engage in religious practices, but members of non-recognized religious groups must marry in a civil ceremony in addition to any religious ceremony. Unrecognized religious groups are not granted tax-exempt status.

The Guidelines for Approval of Religious Organizations require religious groups seeking registration to submit a document on the group's central traditions; descriptions of its most important rituals; a copy of its rules, regulations, and organizational structure; an audited financial statement; and information about the group's leadership and each member with a permanent address in the country. Additionally, the religious group must "not teach or perform actions inconsistent with public morality or order."

All public and private schools, including religious schools, receive government financial support. Evangelical Lutheran theology is taught in public schools in accordance with the law; however, a student may withdraw from religion classes with parental consent. Additionally, the law requires that a Christian studies course also covering world religions be taught in public school. The course is compulsory, although students may be exempted if a parent presents a request in writing. If the student is 15 years old or older, the student and parent must jointly request the student's exemption.

The law allows Muslim, Jewish, and Christian prayers to be substituted for collective prayer in such venues as school assemblies as long as preaching is not also included.

The law requires most foreign religious workers (except citizens of Turkey) to pass a Danish language test within six months of entering the country to be able to obtain an extension of their residence permits as religious workers.

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

The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Easter Monday, Common Prayer Day, Ascension Day, Pentecost, Second Pentecost, Whit Monday, Christmas Eve, Christmas, and the day after Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

Because 14 percent of the ELC's budget was funded by taxpayers, members of other religious groups argued that the system was unfair and that the government did not provide religious equality, despite providing religious freedom.

Critics stated the law requiring Danish language facility for foreign religious workers violated the European Convention on Human Rights and was aimed at restricting the entry of Muslim clerics.

After a well-publicized debate over whether there should be freestanding mosques with domes and minarets in the country, planning began for two privately funded freestanding mosques in Copenhagen and one in Aarhus. At year's end, construction had not yet begun on the grand mosque in Copenhagen. According to the government, there were 72 mosques in the country.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were some reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. These included anti-Semitic, anti-Islamic, and anti-Christian harassment, propaganda (intentionally denigrating another's religion), threats, and assaults, often between young Muslim males and other young persons. Because ethnicity and religion were often inextricably linked, it was difficult to categorize many of the incidents specifically as ethnic or religious intolerance.

According to a report by the Danish Security and Intelligence Service (PET), authorities investigated 24 religiously motivated crimes in 2011. More recent statistics were not available. The majority of these crimes were categorized as general propaganda (12 crimes) or harassment (eight crimes), and two incidents

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each of threats and assaults. Eleven of the religiously motivated crimes were directed against Muslims, seven against Christians, five against Jews, and one against a Buddhist. The number of religiously motivated crimes increased from 10 in 2010 to 24 in 2011.

In May the supreme court upheld the sentence of a Somali man convicted of the attempted assassination of cartoonist Kurt Westergaard in 2010, in retaliation for his controversial cartoon depiction of the Prophet Mohammed in 2005. After serving a ten-year prison term, he will be deported.

On September 22, the international Muslim organization Hizb ut-Tahrir held a peaceful demonstration of approximately 200 participants in front of the U.S. embassy in response to an amateur video many viewed as insulting to Muslims. At various times, the media highlighted the group's statements and demonstrations, including the group's mid-February demonstration which drew 1,000 participants in the Copenhagen neighborhood of Norrebro to support Sharia law in Syria.

The media reported numerous examples of alleged harassment against Muslims, including one incident in October in which an otherwise highly respected female school principal was reported to the police for saying, "I am so (expletive) tired of you Muslims disrupting classes."

There were isolated anti-Semitic incidents. The Mosaic Religious Community reported 37 incidents of anti-Semitism that ranged from harassment to violence. According to victim reports, the perpetrators were mainly immigrants, often from Arab and other Muslim countries. Most incidents involved vandalism, such as graffiti, and nonviolent verbal assaults. In February a number of boys of "Arab appearance" physically and verbally accosted a Jewish boy wearing a Star of David necklace at a major shopping center in Copenhagen. In September a passing cyclist yelled "racists" and "Nazis" to a group of Jewish persons in front of the Great Synagogue in Copenhagen.

During the October Copenhagen Diversity Festival, organizers advised a Jewish group participating in the festival not to fly the Israeli flag lest it bring increased attention or harassment to their group; other participants were not discouraged from displaying flags from other countries.

On November 29, a group of approximately 20 protestors threw firecrackers at the Israeli embassy and spray-painted the words "Borne draebere" ("Child killers") on the walls surrounding the compound; local police arrested one protestor.

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In May four Christian male residents at an asylum center on Langeland were relocated to other facilities after reporting they felt persecuted by the Muslim residents; the investigation was ongoing at year's end.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officers regularly worked with government and civil society to promote tolerance, counteract extremism, and champion diversity throughout all levels of society. Embassy officers met regularly with the Ministry of Social Affairs and Integration; the Minister for Gender Equality and Ecclesiastical Affairs; integration councils from local governments; religious leaders and community groups representing Christian, Muslim, Jewish and other faiths; and community and social welfare groups. At each meeting, embassy officers stressed the importance of religious tolerance and diversity, shared best practices and new ideas and connected U.S.-based practitioners to their Danish counterparts.

The ambassador hosted a reception for Nobel Peace Laureate Tawakkol Karman, who spoke about her role as a Muslim woman in the Arab Spring, drawing religious leaders from the Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities. The embassy sponsored interfaith initiatives, including the "30 Mosques in 30 Days" speaking tour by stand-up comedian Aman Ali, which focused on religious diversity in America. The embassy sponsored the "6 Days of Peace" concert featuring a group of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish musicians from Israel, the West Bank, Jordan, and the United States, whose songs included messages of hope for Middle East peace.

The embassy continued its bilateral exchange and study-tour program. In August the embassy sponsored a visit of six young Somali Danes to Minnesota. Faith and civic community leaders there encouraged the visitors to work to counteract negative Muslim stereotypes and the self-fulfilling nature of such stereotypes. The group met with Muslim, Christian, and Jewish leaders who encouraged tolerance and interfaith dialogue. The trip enabled the Somali-Danish youth to interact with U.S. government officials and Somali-American leaders and to witness first-hand the participation of Somali youth in community, economic, and government programs. As a result of the visit, the Nordic Somali youth implemented a variety of programs in their communities, including a photography workshop for young Somalis and public dialogue events on topics ranging from diversity and participation in society to blogging.

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The embassy also sponsored the visit of three police officers and one civil servant (three of whom were from Muslim backgrounds) to Washington, D.C., and Minneapolis. The visitors witnessed community policing and integration strategies to improve awareness of religious tolerance.

The U.S. embassy promoted religious dialogue, particularly with the Muslim community, and sponsored a variety of programs promoting religious tolerance for public servants, leaders, and citizens. The ambassador hosted two iftars, bringing together leading Christian, Muslim, and Jewish leaders from throughout the country. The ambassador also focused on religious freedom and tolerance in her remarks at an iftar hosted by the Muslim Association of Denmark, an Ashura celebration, and other events sponsored by Muslim groups, the Dialog Forum, and other nongovernmental organizations.

The embassy hosted a series of receptions, lunches, and coffees with young Christians, Muslims, and Jews to promote religious freedom and inclusiveness.