

NORWAY 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the right to choose and practice or change one's religion. The hate crime law punishes expressions of disrespect for religious beliefs, and the government effected its first conviction under that law, but it rescinded an anti-blasphemy provision from the penal code. The government took custody of five children of a Pentecostal family on abuse charges due to spanking, which is illegal. According to the family's attorney, the parents admitted to spanking their children but said the seizure was based on anti-religious bias. The government provided security at Jewish facilities in Oslo and financially supported programs to combat anti-Semitism and increase religious tolerance. Religion and state are separate, and the government proceeded with public hearings on the transition of the Church of Norway, an evangelical Lutheran church, from state church to self-standing entity. However, it continued to provide certain benefits solely to the Church of Norway. The government also provided financial support to other religious and philosophical communities. The Norwegian Center against Racism, a nongovernment organization (NGO), criticized the police for what it said was a failure to take seriously reports of hate crimes against Muslims.

The Jewish community voiced concern about continued anti-Semitic attitudes that it said were primarily evident in the press. In September the Jewish community launched a government-financed national sensitivity campaign targeted at high school students. Members of the Muslim community organized a "peace ring" around the synagogue in Oslo in February in a show of solidarity with the Jewish community. The Norwegian Center against Racism said hate speech was on the rise, particularly on the internet. NGOs and press editorialists continued to express concern that extremist views had increased among second-generation immigrants from Muslim countries. A number of NGOs sponsored programs to combat anti-Semitism and increase interfaith dialogue and cooperation.

U.S. embassy staff met with officials from the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development for discussions centered on the public financing mechanism for faith and philosophical groups defined in law as "life-stance" organizations, as well as the process and complexities involved in fully separating the Church of Norway from the government. Embassy representatives also met with faith groups, NGOs, and media on issues regarding the separation of church and state and interfaith dialogue. The embassy provided a

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support grant for and participated in a religious and ethnic tolerance forum in October. 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 2015 estimate). The National Statistics Bureau estimates 74 percent of the population belongs to the Church of Norway.

The National Statistics Bureau reports Christian denominations other than the Church of Norway have 297,000 registered members, or 53 percent of all religious and life-stance registrations excluding the Church of Norway. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest with 96,000 registered members. Pentecostal congregations have approximately 39,000 registered members. Membership in Muslim congregations is 141,000. Muslims are located throughout the country, but the population is concentrated in the Oslo region. Jewish congregations have approximately 750 registered members. There are two official Jewish congregations, one in Oslo and one in Trondheim. Buddhists, Sikhs, and Hindus together constitute less than 5 percent of registered members of religious groups.

The Norwegian Humanist Association is the largest life-stance organization registered with the government. It has a registered membership of 88,000.

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. However, the constitution also states “the king shall at all times

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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 will 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 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.

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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 covers world religions and philosophies while promoting tolerance and respect for all religious beliefs, as well as for atheism. Based on a December 2014 agreement of the governing coalition, up to 50 percent of the CKREE course content is devoted to Christianity. 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. The parents need not give a reason for requesting an exemption.

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

A law that became effective on January 1 requires hospitals to perform, under a doctor's supervision, circumcisions of baby boys at the request of parents. Religious circumcisions are permitted outside of a medical facility, but the presence of a qualified medical professional is required.

According to the law, the slaughter of an animal must be preceded by stunning or administering anesthetics, making kosher slaughter practices and some forms of halal meat preparation illegal. Halal and kosher meat may be imported.

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

Government Practices

In November the Child Protective Service (Barnevernet) took custody of the five children of Pentecostals Marius and Ruth Bodnariu on abuse charges due to spanking, which is illegal. According to the family's attorney, the Bodnarius 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.

Public hearings continued with regard to the transition of the Church of Norway from the state church (a legal status that ended in 2012) to a self-standing entity. In April the Ministry of Culture presented a detailed plan to parliament to implement the previously approved transfer of Church employees from the state

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payroll effective January 1, 2017. While Church employees would no longer be employees of the state, the Church would continue to receive a large annual grant from the government. The Ministry of Culture stated the grant to the Church would increase after its employees are removed from the state payroll. Other registered religious and life-stance organizations would also continue to receive state grants. However, many representatives from these other groups stated the size of the grant to the Church of Norway under the plan was not based solely on the size of membership and would signal that its privileged relationship with the state would last beyond the legal separation.

In June the county government of Oslo-Akershus determined that the membership numbers of the Catholic Church had been overstated nationally, with many purported members unaware they had been listed as such by the Church. The Church was ordered to reimburse the state 40 million Norwegian kroner (NOK) (\$4.5 million). The Church appealed the decision.

The Ministry of Local Government and Modernization provided NOK one million (\$113,300) for security at the Jewish Religious Community's (DMT) facility and synagogue in Oslo based on incidents in prior years. The Ministry of Justice and Public Security maintained a dialogue with the DMT, and the police aimed at ensuring the DMT's facilities were properly safeguarded. The street in front of the synagogue was closed to enhance security following the *Charlie Hebdo* terrorist attack in Paris in January.

The national police unit for combating organized and other serious crimes maintained a web page for the public to contact police regarding hate crimes and hate speech, particularly online, which both the police and NGOs said was a significant problem. In March the Oslo District Court convicted a man of illegal hate speech and of spitting on a Muslim woman at a supermarket in Oslo, sentencing him to 18 days in prison and a NOK 15,000 (\$1,870) fine. This was the first conviction under the country's hate crime law.

The Norwegian Center against Racism continued criticizing the police for what it said was a failure to take reports of hate crimes against Muslims seriously. Members of the police said there was a need for better training to deal with ethnically-based crimes, which would include crimes against Muslims.

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The Ministry of Defense allowed members of the military to wear religious symbols, including headgear, with military uniforms. A ban remained on wearing religious symbols, including headgear, with police uniforms.

The government permitted individual schools to decide whether to implement bans on religious garb such as burqas or *niqabs*. Two vocational schools maintained bans.

Many non-Christian religious organizations 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 Catholic and evangelical churches agreed with these organizations that the course contents favored the Church of Norway.

The Ministry of Education continued grants for school programs raising awareness about anti-Semitism. Schools nationwide observed Holocaust Memorial Day on January 27. High school curricula included material on the deportation and extermination of Jewish citizens from 1942 to 1945.

The government continued to support “The White Buses,” 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 waived import duties and provided guidance on import procedures to both the Jewish and Muslim communities.

The Ministry of Culture provided NOK six million (\$750,000) to promote dialogue among religious and life-stance organizations. The Ministry said the initiative, which helped these groups to meet regularly and strengthen their relationship, was directly responsible for the rapid coordination among interfaith organizations to respond to the German-founded PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West) as it tried to establish itself in the country in January. The ministry said it would double its support for the dialogue to NOK 12 million (\$1.35 million) in 2016.

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In March a hospital carried out a circumcision of a Muslim baby boy, the first such procedure since the law requiring hospitals to offer such procedures came into effect.

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

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were three reports of religious discrimination made to the equality and antidiscrimination ombudsman, and 28 reports of hate crimes with a religious motive made to the police in 2014.

In a radio interview in February, Iraqi-born cleric Najmaddin Faraj Ahmed praised the killing of *Charlie Hebdo* cartoonists, saying they were “heathens” whom “it is permissible to kill.” He also urged others to kill a Kurdish immigrant. He had been released from jail earlier in the year after serving a sentence for making death threats. In October a court sentenced him to 18 months in jail for making death threats and inciting criminal actions and ordered him to pay NOK 75,000 (\$8,500) to the Kurdish immigrant.

In September DNB Bank apologized for issuing a credit card printed with an image of a caricature of a Jew in front of a background of gold coins. The bank said the image had been printed through a system that allowed users to upload their own photos to be printed on their credit cards, but this image was printed in error; the individual who received the card said he had not ordered the image.

The Norwegian Jewish Community, the country’s largest Jewish organization, expressed concern about what it viewed as a continued tolerance for anti-Semitic expression, primarily in the press. It pointed as an example to a cartoon published in *Dagbladet*, a major daily newspaper, on September 24, comparing the Israeli government to Nazi Germany, which it said showed that anti-Semitic views still permeated society. The Israeli Embassy in Oslo filed a formal complaint against the newspaper and responded with an op-ed published in the same paper on September 29.

Press editorialists, terrorism experts, government officials, and individuals in the Muslim community continued to express concern that extremist views had increased among second-generation immigrants from majority Muslim countries.

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Some mosques and leaders of immigrant communities cooperated with the police and municipal social service organizations to develop and conduct workshops and other intervention programs targeting groups at risk for radicalization.

Members of the Muslim community organized a “peace ring” around the synagogue in Oslo in February in a show of solidarity with the Jewish community. The effort received broad support from authorities and local citizens with more than 1,000 people in attendance. Organizers and local government officials commented that the success of the event illustrated the good relationship and coordination among religious communities, as well as the tolerance for different religious practices.

The Norwegian Center against Racism and the Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities (HC) conducted programs against anti-Semitism with financial support from the government. Both organizations used materials they developed in high schools nationwide to promote tolerance for religious diversity. They also screened materials used in public schools for anti-Semitic content. HC was the lead for the program for the prevention of anti-Semitism, racism, and undemocratic attitudes, under which it guided schools in the preparation of action plans.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy staff met with officials from the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development who work on religious issues. The discussions centered on the public financing mechanism for faith and life-stance organizations, as well as the process and complexity involved in fully separating the Church of Norway from the government.

In June the embassy hosted an interfaith breakfast to discuss the legislative and practical process of separating the Church of Norway from the state and its implications. While most guests at the breakfast welcomed the separation process, many continued to see a preferential state status for the Church of Norway and Christianity. Most participants noted the event provided a useful forum for discussing different perspectives on the subject.

The embassy provided a support grant to the Universal Tolerance Organization, an NGO, to hold an event in the fall that addressed religious tolerance in a changing society. The day-long conference brought together politicians, think tanks, and

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members of religious organizations and NGOs to reflect on the country's growing multicultural population and develop strategies to promote understanding of different ethnicities and religious communities.

The embassy again hosted an Eid al-Fitr celebration with members of different faith communities, government officials, and NGOs to promote religious tolerance. In his remarks, the Charge d'Affaires supported religious diversity and stressed the importance of religious tolerance. The event also served as a platform to encourage interfaith conversations.