

# **NORWAY 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and protects the right to choose, practice, or change one's faith or life stance (belief in a nonreligious philosophy). It declares the Church of Norway is the country's established church. The government continued to provide the Church of Norway with exclusive benefits, including funds for salaries and benefits of clergy and staff. The government continued to implement an action plan to combat antisemitism, particularly hate speech, as well as its action plan to combat anti-Muslim sentiment. The government continued to provide financial support for interreligious dialogue.

Stop the Islamization of Norway (SIAN) held a number of rallies during the year in different cities, including one outside the U.S. embassy, that received widespread media attention.

U.S. embassy officials met with officials from the Ministry of Children and Families to discuss the law on faith and life stance communities, public financing for faith and life stance organizations, and the impacts COVID restrictions had on individuals' right to practice their faith and religious communities' ability to assemble and conduct ceremonies. In addition, embassy officials discussed with officials from the Ministry of Justice and Public Security and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the government's efforts to prosecute religiously based hate crimes as well as to promote religious freedom. Embassy representatives met with individuals from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and faith and religious minority groups, including Christians, Muslims, Jews, Uyghur Muslims, and humanists, to discuss issues such as religious freedom and tolerance and the integration of minority groups. The embassy routinely used social media to share messages of religious tolerance and to highlight religious holidays and events.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 5.5 million (midyear 2021). According to Statistics Norway, the official government statistics office, 68 percent of the population (June 2020) belongs to the Church of Norway, an evangelical Lutheran denomination, a decline of 2.8 percentage points over the previous three years.

Statistics Norway, which assesses membership in religious groups using criteria based on registration, age, and attendance, reports registered membership in religious and life stance communities other than the Church of Norway is approximately 12.6 percent of the population (January 2021 estimate); 6.9 percent belongs to other Christian denominations, of which the Roman Catholic Church is the largest, at 3 percent, and 3.1 percent is Muslim. There are approximately 21,500 Buddhists, 11,900 Hindus, 4,200 Sikhs, and 760 Jews registered in the country. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) has approximately 4,600 members.

According to Statistics Norway, approximately 1.8 percent of the population participates in life stance organizations. The Norwegian Humanist Association reports approximately 100,000 registered members, making it the largest life stance organization in the country.

Immigrants, whom Statistics Norway defines as those born outside the country and their children, even if born in Norway, comprise the majority of members of religious groups outside the Church of Norway. Immigrants from Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and the Philippines have increased the number of Catholics in the country, while those from countries including Syria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia have increased the size of the Muslim community. Catholics and Muslims generally have greater representation in cities than in rural areas. Muslims are located throughout the country but are mainly concentrated in the Oslo region. Most of the Jewish community resides in or near the cities of Oslo and Trondheim.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution states all individuals shall have the right to free exercise of religion, and all religious and philosophical communities shall be supported on equal terms. The constitution also states, “The King shall at all times profess the Evangelical-Lutheran religion,” national values “will remain our Christian and humanistic heritage,” and “The Church of Norway shall remain the country’s established church and be supported by the state.” The law further specifies the right of individuals to choose or change their faith or life stance. Any person older than age 15 has the right to join or leave a religious or life stance community. Parents have the right to decide their child’s faith or life stance community before

age 15, but they must take into consideration the views of the children once they reach the age of seven and give those views priority once they reach age 12.

The penal code specifies penalties, including a fine or imprisonment for up to six months, for discrimination based on faith or life stance, or for expressions of disrespect for religious believers or members of religious groups.

By law, the national government and local municipalities provide direct financial support to the Church of Norway. The national government provides an annual block grant that covers the cost of salaries, benefits, and pension plans of Church employees. The national government may provide additional support for other projects. By law, localities provide partial funding for the maintenance of Church properties, such as Church buildings and cemeteries, which other religious communities are required to fund on their own.

All registered faith and life stance organizations are eligible to apply for financial support from the government. The government pays prorated subsidies to 724 such organizations based on their membership numbers in 2021, as compared to membership numbers of the Church of Norway.

According to a law that went into effect January 1, faith and life stance organizations with at least 50 registered members may apply for state subsidies, a decrease from the previous requirement of 500 adherents. Faith and life stance organizations must provide annual reports detailing activities, opportunities for children and youth, the use of the state subsidies, marital law administration, and gender equality, as well as any funds received from abroad. The government also continues to provide the Church of Norway with an annual block grant that pays the full cost of salaries, benefits, and pension plans of Church employees. The government must provide additional funding to the Church of Norway for maintenance of cemeteries and religious buildings, in addition to any provided by municipal governments.

To register, a faith or life stance organization must notify the government 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, and the processes for amending statutes and dissolution. A group must report its national tally of members annually. If a religious group does not register, it does not receive financial support from the government, but there are no restrictions on its activities except that faith and life stance communities that practice or give support to violent activities or receive funding

from abroad may lose financial support following an assessment by the state. Most religious organizations and life stance communities register and receive government funding.

Public schools include a mandatory course on Christian Knowledge and Religious and Ethical Information (CKREE) for grades one through 10. State-employed instructors teach the CKREE course, which covers world religions and philosophies and promotes tolerance and respect for all religious beliefs, as well as for atheism. Students may not opt out of this course. Schools do not permit religious ceremonies, but schools may organize religious outings, such as attending Christmas services at a local Church of Norway church. At their parents' request, children may opt out of participating in or performing specific acts related to religion, such as a class trip to a church. Parents need not give a reason for requesting an exemption. Students may apply to be absent to celebrate certain religious holidays, such as an Eid or Passover, but there is no celebration or observance of such holidays in public schools.

Members of minority religious groups must apply for annual leave from work in order to celebrate religious holidays; many Christian religious holidays are official holidays.

The law bans clothing at educational institutions that mostly or fully covers the face. The prohibition applies to students and teachers wearing burqas or niqabs in schools and day-care centers.

A hate crime law punishes some expressions of disrespect for religious believers, which includes those meant to threaten or mock someone, or promote hate, persecution, or contempt. Police are responsible for investigating criminal cases of discrimination, including those involving religion, such as hate crimes. The government-funded but independent Antidiscrimination Tribunal reviews noncriminal discrimination and harassment cases, including those involving religion.

Individuals may apply for a full exemption from the required registration for a year of military service for religious reasons and are not required to perform alternative service.

According to the law, an animal must be stunned or administered anesthetics before slaughter, making most traditional kosher and halal slaughter practices illegal. Halal and kosher meat may be imported. The Ministry of Agriculture and

Food routinely waives import duties on halal and kosher meat and provides guidance on import procedures to the Jewish and Muslim communities.

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

### **Government Practices**

Organizations criticized the government for unequally applying COVID-19 restrictions among different faith and life stance groups. For example, according to the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway (STL), limits on gathering sizes and seating arrangements were more conducive to church ceremonies than those of other faith or life stance communities. The Ministry of Children and Families stated that this was occurring. Some municipalities banned funeral services at crematoriums while permitting them with restrictions at churches. Pandemic restrictions on moving across municipalities to perform clerical and other professional duties did not apply to Church of Norway clergy. The Church of Norway received funding from the government for financial losses resulting from the pandemic, while other faith and life stance groups did not.

The government extended its 2016-20 action plan to counter antisemitism to 2023 and continued funding projects carried out by government, academic institutions, and the Mosaic Community (DMT), the country's principal Jewish organization. Although a 2017 survey showed a decrease in antisemitism in Norwegian society, the government noted that such attitudes still existed and referenced the Nordic Resistance Movement's (NRM) presence outside the Oslo Synagogue on Yom Kippur in September 2020. The plan emphasizes data collection, training and education programs in schools, research on antisemitism and Jewish life in the country, and efforts to safeguard Jewish culture. For example, the government provided 11.3 million kroner (\$1.29 million) to the Dembra Program of the Norwegian Center for Holocaust and Minority Studies (the Holocaust Center), an independent research and educational center associated with the University of Oslo. Dembra is a nationwide education program offered to increase awareness and prevent and combat antisemitism, prejudice, discrimination, and harassment of minorities in schools. Throughout the year, the government continued to implement measures from its action plan to combat discrimination against and hate toward Muslims. The plan contains 18 measures that focus on research and education, dialogue across religious communities, and police initiatives such as registration of hate crimes toward Muslims as a separate category in crime statistics. The plan also outlines a new grant scheme outlining security measures for religious and life stance communities.

The Ministry of Justice and Public Security continued its five-million-kroner (\$570,000) fund to enhance physical security for religious and life stance communities considered potential targets by the Police Security Service annual threat assessment. The Norwegian Police Directorate administers the fund.

The government's 2021 budget included funding to build awareness of and support research on hate crimes as a part of its 2020-23 Action Plan Against Racism and Discrimination on the Basis of Ethnicity and Religion.

The government provided five million kroner (\$570,000) in additional funding to the Church of Norway and other religious and life stance communities to increase the frequency and quality of digital content and digital events during the Christmas holidays in lieu of in-person gatherings restricted by COVID-19 measures.

Police continued to prohibit officers from wearing religious symbols, including religious headwear, with police uniforms. Other uniformed organizations allowed the use of religious headwear. The military provided some religious headwear that conformed to military dress regulations.

Christian, Muslim, and humanist chaplains served as officers in the military. Religious and humanist groups provided chaplains at their own expense to hospitals, universities, and prisons.

Funded by the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization, the Oslo Synagogue, in coordination with the DMT, worked with the Oslo police to coordinate security for Jewish heritage sites and the Oslo Synagogue, and also acted as an intermediary between the Jewish community and police to facilitate timely reporting and monitoring of hate crimes.

The NGO Center against Racism continued to provide training and advisory services to police on detecting, investigating, and prosecuting racially and religiously motivated hate crimes. Police continued to assign personnel to support and coordinate these efforts, including providing resources to maintain hate crime investigators in each of the country's 12 police districts.

The National Criminal Investigation Service continued to maintain a website for the public to contact police to report hate crimes and hate speech, including religiously motivated incidents.

The national CKREE curriculum continued to include components on Judaism and the Holocaust. In addition, the Ministry of Education and Research continued grants for school programs that raised awareness about antisemitism and hate speech, including religiously motivated hate speech. The government also continued to fund the Jewish Pathfinders, a program through which young Jewish adults engaged with high school students about the teachings and principles of Judaism and being Jewish in the country. In many instances, the government provided these grants as part of its action plan against antisemitism.

Schools nationwide observed Holocaust Memorial Day on January 27. The government allocated 15.5 million kroner (\$1.77 million) to support extracurricular programs that took secondary school students to Nazi concentration camps and other sites on three-day tours to educate them about the Holocaust, but it did not conduct these tours during the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The two NGOs with primary responsibility for these programs, Hvite Busser (White Buses) and Aktive Fredsreiser (Travel for Peace), continued providing teaching materials, entrance fees, guided tours, and tour guide expenses for students who took day trips. Schools facilitated fundraising activities among the students as well.

State support to religious and life stance organizations from the national government totaled approximately six billion kroner (\$683.53 million) during the year. The government provided 2.365 billion kroner (\$269.42 million) or 632 kroner (\$72) per member to the Church of Norway for salaries and operating expenses during the year, including for pensions and benefits of Church employees and clergy. The government provided other registered religious and life stance organizations approximately 891 million kroner (\$101 million) in total or 1,310 kroner (\$150) per registered member. The Church of Jesus Christ continued to be the only major religious community choosing to decline government funding. Under the new law, all funding to religious and life stance communities comes from the national government. However, the Church of Norway received additional local funding for the maintenance of church properties, such as church buildings and cemeteries, which other religious communities had to fund on their own. The Humanist Association repeated its criticism of this practice and stated that maintenance of properties should be a municipal responsibility to ensure equal treatment.

The Jehovah's Witnesses filed an application for annual state support, having received funding in past years, but by year's end the County Governor of Oslo and Viken, responsible for reviewing the application, did not announce a determination on the application. The practices of the Jehovah's Witnesses' were also the subject

of a high profile legal case in which a former member was not permitted to have contact with her children who remained members of the religious community. The national Court of Appeal ruled that the former member did have the right to have contact with her children. At year's end, the case was pending before the Supreme Court, which agreed to hear an appeal.

Consistent with previous years, the government budget provided 77.7 million kroner (\$8.85 million) in subsidies for Church of Norway buildings and 15.3 million kroner (\$1.74 million) to religious dialogue and umbrella organizations, such as STL, the Christian Council, the Buddhist Council, and the Muslim Dialogue Network, to promote dialogue and tolerance among religious and life stance organizations.

The government continued to fund workshops and other intervention programs that featured practitioners who worked with religious minorities to promote their economic and social integration into society. Efforts focused on youth education and engaging local community stakeholders.

Proposed legislation for the education system, presented by the previous government, would ban religious activity in schools, such as attending school-organized church services. This legislation remained pending for action by parliament at the end of the year. The new government, which took office in October, had not made any statements on the legislation, and media and public discussion was minimal. There was no significant opposition to the legislation from religious groups.

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

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

The Holocaust Center and the Center against Racism reported religiously motivated hate speech, particularly online, remained active. The NRM, SIAN, Vigrid, and online news sites *Document.no* and *Resett.no* were among the most active organizations, according to the Center against Racism.

Police and NGOs also stated that a small number of individuals continued to participate actively in online chat rooms, message boards, and forums such as 4chan, 8chan, and EndChan, which regularly featured antisemitic and/or anti-Muslim content. Police used tip lines to monitor online hate speech. Norwegian



Police listed awareness campaigns directed at the public and within the police as success factors for increased reporting of hate crimes by possible victims.

The Holocaust Center stated anti-Muslim organizations such as SIAN, Human Rights Service, and *Document.no* remained active during the year, including by posting articles online or in print media. The Holocaust Center stated the groups were relatively small but maintained a strong and well organized presence on the internet. In many instances, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant views were closely linked. SIAN held a number of rallies in different cities that received widespread media attention and that also included larger groups of counterprotesters.

In response to the significant increase in reported hate crimes nationally between 2016 and 2019, Bergen, the country's second largest city, in September launched its own action plan to combat hate crimes against Muslims. Hate crime statistics from 2019 showed that all religiously motivated hate crimes reported in Bergen targeted the Muslim population. The chair of the Board of the Bergen Mosque told public broadcaster NRK in September that the mosque regularly received letters containing hateful messages, including statements such as "Islamic fascism is just as merciless as Nazism" and "Islam is right-wing extremism at its worst." The chair also said female members of the mosque had been spat on and pushed, and had their hijabs forcibly removed. In December, an elderly white Norwegian male was caught on video harassing a young Muslim woman in Bergen who said she intended to report the incident to police. City officials condemned the incident.

In September, the government announced that the NGO Human Rights Service would not receive funding in the 2022 national budget. Although the NGO describes itself as critical of Islam, the Center against Racism described the organization as Islamophobic. It had received funding from the national budget since 2002.

The Ministry of Culture and Equality reported that hate speech, racism, and harassment increased during the COVID-19 pandemic as restrictions increased time and activity on digital platforms in the absence of physical meeting places.

The Holocaust Center continued to conduct programs on the Holocaust and to combat antisemitism, with financial support from the government. The center developed instructional materials on the tolerance of religious diversity and distributed them to high schools nationwide. It published numerous articles documenting antisemitism and the persecution of religious minorities throughout the world, including how far-right media used professional media to convey

“uncivil” news with an antisemitic message. The center operated a website that provided a comprehensive overview of antisemitism and served as a foundation for the center’s educational efforts. It also screened materials used in public schools for antisemitic content. In addition, the center continued to operate a museum and library supported by its research organization and to offer a wide range of educational materials, programs, exhibitions, and publications. The center organized a memorial ceremony at the Oslo monument to the victims of the Holocaust, in collaboration with the DMT.

The Holocaust Center continued to play a significant role in supporting the government’s action plan against antisemitism by developing educational materials and online platforms for the Ministry of Education and Research and monitoring both antisemitic and anti-Muslim attitudes throughout society. It conducted research on Jewish life in the country, antisemitism in Scandinavia, religious extremism and radicalization, and hate crimes, both on its own initiative and on behalf of parliament and government ministries.

The STL continued to foster interfaith dialogue by holding joint meetings with all its member communities, including virtual events when COVID-19 restrictions barred most public gatherings. Its mandate was to promote the equal treatment of religious and life stance communities and respect and understanding among all individuals and faith and life stance communities through dialogue. It received support from the government, as well as financial and in-kind contributions from its member organizations.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

Embassy officials met with officials of the Ministry of Children and Families who worked on religious issues to discuss the law on religion and public financing for faith and life stance organizations. They also met with officials from the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, as well as the Equality and Anti-Discrimination Ombudsman, to discuss efforts to track, investigate, and prosecute religiously based hate crimes.

Embassy staff engaged a wide range of religious and civil society groups to discuss religious freedom, integration of minority groups, life as a religious person, and efforts to promote religious tolerance in the country, as well as their concerns about religious discrimination and perceptions of government favoritism for the Church of Norway. These groups included the STL, Muslim Dialogue Network, Catholic Church, Church of Norway, Church of Jesus Christ, Humanist

Association of Norway, Amnesty International, Uyghur Muslim representatives, Norwegian Center for Holocaust Studies and Religious Minorities, Christian Council of Norway (an umbrella organization for Christian churches in Norway), and Stefanus Alliance (a Christian missions and human rights organization).

The embassy used social media to honor a range of religious holidays celebrated by different faiths in the country. In January, the embassy commemorated Holocaust Memorial Day with digital events. The embassy also highlighted Eid al-Fitr and similar events on social media.