

# **NORWAY 2022 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 as the country's established church.

The government continued to implement the 2021-23 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 that received widespread media attention and frequently attracted counter-protesters.

U.S. embassy officials met with officials from the Ministry of Children and Families to discuss the law and public financing for faith and life-stance organizations. 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), faith and religious minority groups, and life-stance organizations, including Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and humanists, to discuss issues such as religious freedom and tolerance and the integration of minority groups into society. 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 5.6 million (midyear 2022). According to Statistics Norway, the official government statistics office, 65 percent of the population (June 2022) belong to the Church of Norway, an

evangelical Lutheran denomination, a decline of 4.9 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 13 percent of the population (September 2022 estimate); 6.9 percent belong 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 22,000 Buddhists, 12,600 Hindus, 4,300 Sikhs, and 740 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 2 percent of the population participates in life-stance organizations. The Norwegian Humanist Association reports approximately 130,000 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 the country, comprise the majority of members of religious groups outside the Church of Norway. Immigration from the predominantly Catholic countries of Poland, Lithuania, and the Philippines increased the number of Catholics in the country, while immigration from countries including Syria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia increased the size of the Muslim community. Approximately 34,000 Ukrainian refugees had arrived in the country at year's end. Although no estimate of religious identification is available for this group, approximately two-thirds of the population of Ukraine identify as Orthodox Christians. Catholics and Muslims generally have greater representation in cities than in rural areas. Approximately 30 percent of Oslo's population are immigrants, as defined by Statistics Norway. 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 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 child 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 of Norway 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 736 such organizations based on their 2022 membership when compared with membership in the Church of Norway.

According to the Religious Communities Act, religious and life stance communities 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 law stipulates that the government can refuse applications for subsidies from organizations that

receive funding from foreign states that “do not respect religious freedom.” The law does not further interpret what constitutes a state that does not respect religious freedom and the government does not publish a list of such countries. Approval of state subsidies for religious and life stance communities is made at the county level.

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 its employees. The government must provide additional funding to the church 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 the national total number of members annually. If a religious group does not register, it does not receive financial support from the government.

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 2021 Religious Act instructs employers to provide employees two days off work annually to observe religious holidays. Under the Labor Law,

employers may refuse additional days off, even if those days are made up during other holidays. Det Mosaiske Trossamfund (DMT), the country's principal Jewish organization, commented that performing work is forbidden on 13 Jewish holidays, and that Jewish employees could be compelled to come to work or face consequences under the Labor Law, including being evaluated for negligent performance.

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

A hate crime law punishes some expressions of disrespect for religious believers, which include expressions 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.

By law, an animal must be stunned or administered anesthetics before slaughter, making most traditional kosher and halal slaughter practices illegal. Halal and kosher meat consequently must be imported. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food routinely waived import duties on halal and kosher meat and provided 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**

In 2021, organizations criticized the government for unequally applying COVID-19 restrictions among different faith and life-stance groups, including limits on gathering sizes and seating arrangements and banning 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, and the Church received funding from the government for financial losses resulting from the pandemic in 2021, while other faith and life-stance groups did not. In February, the government lifted remaining COVID restrictions, ending the effects those restrictions had on religious practice.

The government continued to implement measures identified in its action plan to counter antisemitism, and it also continued funding related projects carried out by government, academic institutions, and the DMT. 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 NOK 12.5 million (\$1.2 million) to the Dembra Program to train teachers to increase awareness and prevent and combat antisemitism, prejudice, discrimination, and harassment of minorities in schools. The Dembra Program is coordinated by the Norwegian Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities (the Holocaust Center), an independent research and educational center associated with the University of Oslo. 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 the 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 government held an annual forum for government officials on anti-Muslim sentiment that included the Prime Minister and representatives of Muslim communities.

The Ministry of Justice and Public Security continued its NOK 5 million (\$510,000) fund to enhance physical security for religious and life stance communities considered potential targets in the Police Security Service's annual threat assessment. The Norwegian Police Directorate administers the fund.

The government continued to implement measures from its *2020-23 Action Plan against Racism and Discrimination on the Basis of Ethnicity and Religion*.

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.

The Oslo Synagogue, in coordination with the DMT, also coordinated with the Oslo police, with funds from the Ministry of Local Government and Modernization, to provide added security for Jewish heritage sites and the Oslo Synagogue. It 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 provided grants for school programs that raised awareness about antisemitism and hate speech, including religiously motivated hate speech. The government 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 (also known globally as International Holocaust Remembrance Day). The government allocated NOK 15.5 million (\$1.6 million) to support extracurricular programs that

took secondary school students to former Nazi concentration camps and other sites on three-day tours to educate them about the Holocaust. The two NGOs with primary responsibility for these programs, Hvite Busser (White Buses) and Aktive Fredsreiser (Travel for Peace), provided 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.

Government funding of religious and life stance organizations totaled approximately NOK five billion (\$510 million) during the year. The government provided NOK 2.434 billion (\$250 million), or NOK 131 (\$13) 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 NOK 942 million (\$95.8 million) in total, or NOK 1,350 (\$137) 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 for 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, in order to ensure equal treatment.

The Ministry of Children and Families and the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities in Norway (STL) acknowledged that some restrictions and registration requirements pose barriers to smaller organizations to register for funding. Most religious organizations and life stance communities registered and received government funding, channeled through the municipality where the organization is registered. STL and the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief raised concerns that the state's ability to approve or deny financial support for an organization based on review of its application or an assessment of that group's religious practices created the opportunity for the government to influence an organization's religious beliefs or practice.



In January, the county governor of Oslo and Viken denied Jehovah's Witnesses' 2021 application for annual state support following an assessment of the group's religious practices, despite the group having received funding for the previous 30 years. The determination was based on the group's practice of "shunning," according to a Jehovah's Witness report. Jehovah's Witnesses appealed the decision to the Ministry of Children and Families, which in October, announced it upheld the county governor's decision. The practices of 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 when they were at church services or church events with the other parent, as they remained members of the group after her exclusion from the community. In May, the Supreme Court ruled that the Religious Freedom Act allows religious communities to make such decisions about their membership, and the court did not overrule the exclusion. In its decision, the court said that freedom of religion does not give anyone the right to become a member or to remain a member of a particular denomination. In October, Jehovah's Witnesses reported the county governor's office had informed them that the group risked loss of registration as a religious community, and that the office had provided a December deadline to "rectify the situation," but gave no details on what changes were expected. The county governor's office had made no changes to the Jehovah's Witnesses registration status at year's end.

In June, the Prime Minister announced that the government intended to outlaw "conversion therapy" (therapy intended to change a person's sexual orientation or gender identity) as part of an action plan focused on improving the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex persons. There were, however, no reports of cases where conversion therapy was practiced. The proposed bill was sent for public consultation through October and then for submission to parliament for a vote in the spring of 2023. In October, the country's Council of Catholic Bishops issued a statement opposing the bill, stating that it would restrict religious freedom. The bishops' letter stated that "...prayer, intercession, or other religious practice" could become punishable under the draft. Jehovah's Witnesses also objected to the proposal, stating in their annual report that the proposed law could be applied to include things said noncoercively during pastoral care and prayers.

The government provided NOK 74 million (\$7.5 million) in subsidies for Church of Norway buildings and NOK 15.77 million (\$1.6 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 groups 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.

New legislation presented by the previous government would ban religious activity in schools, such as attending school-organized church services. Under this legislation, students may apply for an exemption from the ban in order to voluntarily participate in religious activities in school. Schools would continue the teaching of religions and life stances as part of the regular curriculum. A public hearing on the legislation was completed in October and the government was further reviewing the legislation before their stated intention to introduce it to parliament in the spring of 2023, where it must pass two rounds in parliament before implementation. If approved, implementation would take place with the fall 2024 semester. There were no significant reports of 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, Center against Racism, and the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief all reported an increase in religiously motivated hate speech, during the year, particularly online. The Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), SIAN, Vigrid, and online news sites *Document.no* and *Steigan.no* were among the most active organizations contributing to this increase, according to the Holocaust Center, Center against Racism, and Muslim community representatives. The Holocaust Center reported that the online leftist nationalist site *Steigan.no*, which has links to the Red Party, published articles critical of Ukraine that included an antisemitic message. MDN said anti-immigrant rhetoric from the Liberal party

makes life more challenging for Muslims and immigrants in the country. MDN cited an increase in such rhetoric, and subsequent hate-speech and harassment, after major news events.

Police used tip lines to monitor online hate speech. Police listed awareness campaigns directed at the public and within the police as success factors for increased reporting of hate crimes by victims and members of the public.

Organizations, including SIAN, Human Rights Service, and *Document.no*, posted anti-Muslim 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. Researchers at the University of Oslo Center for Research on Terrorism (C-REX) reported that in many instances, anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant views were closely linked. SIAN held a number of anti-Muslim rallies in different cities, including Quran burnings, that received widespread media attention and frequently included larger groups of counter protesters. On July 1, SIAN held Quran burnings in front of a mosque and a police station. The leader of SIAN was involved in a car collision immediately following the event, and a police investigation of the incident was ongoing at year's end.

The government did not fund the NGO Human Rights Service in the 2022 national budget. The NGO described itself as critical of Islam, while the Center against Racism described the organization as "Islamophobic." It had received annual funding from the national budget since 2002.

The DMT's website offers information in both Ukrainian and Russian to accommodate immigrants from Ukraine.

The Holocaust Center continued to conduct programs on the Holocaust and to combat antisemitism, with financial support from the government. The center conducted research on antisemitism and anti-Muslim attitudes in the country and published a report on its findings in December. The report found antisemitic attitudes decreased in the country over time, but it noted that antisemitic attitudes and attacks had still increased slightly overall since 2017. One in 10 respondents in a poll expressed the belief that violence against Jews can be defended, while in response to questions on anti-Muslim attitudes nearly 50 percent of Norwegians believe Muslims are to blame for the harassment they

experience. The DMT stated that the report demonstrates antisemitic sentiment underlying views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. 32.8 percent of respondents somewhat or fully agreed with the statement, “Israel treats the Palestinians as badly as the Jews were treated during the Second World War.” Comparing the results with its 2017 report, the center announced, “In contrast to the measured decrease in negative attitudes [...] a higher number in both groups (Jews and Muslims) report negative experiences [...] and who say they sometimes hide their religious affiliation in fear of negative attitudes. There is a greater number in the Muslim group who report negative experiences, but there is a far greater number among the Jews who hide their religious affiliation.” The center reported the Jewish community felt increasingly threatened.

The center developed instructional materials on the importance of tolerance of religious diversity and distributed them to high schools nationwide. It conducted research on the links between antisemitism, anti-Muslim sentiment, and racism. The center continued to publish articles documenting antisemitism and the persecution of religious minorities throughout the world, including how far-right media used professionally produced content, particularly in social media, to convey “uncivil” news containing antisemitic and anti-Muslim messages. The center operated a website that provided a comprehensive overview of the threat of antisemitism and that 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 that included a wide range of educational materials, programs, exhibitions, and publications. In November, the center sponsored and 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 by monitoring both antisemitic and anti-Muslim attitudes throughout society. It conducted research on Jewish life in the country, religious extremism and radicalization, and hate crimes, including trends across Scandinavia, both on its own initiative and on behalf of parliament and government ministries.

Religious centers under the MDN, including the Islamic Cultural Center and the Rabita Mosque, were active in combating anti-Muslim sentiment through dialogue with the government and outreach programs. Youth in the mosque's Pathfinders program visited schools around the country, bringing students into contact with Muslim youth – sometimes for the first time – to build bridges and combat stereotypes.

Mosques routinely locked their doors at certain hours and employed armed security in response to security threats. Muslim representatives reported these restrictions prevented members from fully accessing the mosques to pray or freely practice their religion.

Members of the Muslim community noted that the agenda and focus of religious communities is influenced by the financial support they receive and said strong financial support for mosques from conservative organizations leads to more conservative policy and rhetoric.

The STL continued to foster interfaith dialogue by holding joint meetings with all its member communities, reflecting its mandates to promote the equal treatment of religious and life stance communities and to build 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**

U.S. 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, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Equality and Antidiscrimination Ombudsman, to discuss efforts to track, investigate, and prosecute religiously based hate crimes.

The Ambassador held an interfaith dialogue with religious and community leaders from the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim communities and representatives from the STL. The dialogue allowed for an open discussion on the state of religious freedom in the country and issues of concern facing religious

communities, including the growing role of social media in hate speech and the challenges of engaging in civic dialogue in a majority secular society.

Embassy officials 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 tolerance of all religious groups 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 Church of Norway, STL, Muslim Dialogue Network, Catholic Church, Islamic Cultural Center, Humanist Association of Norway, DMT, Rabita Mosque, Sanatan Mandir Sabha Hindu Temple, Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Amnesty International, Buddhist Federation of Norway, Minotenk, Norwegian Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities, American Lutheran Congregation, Uyghur Muslim representatives, and religious researchers and historians at the University of Oslo Faculty of Theology and C-REX.

The embassy used social media to honor a range of religious holidays celebrated by different faiths in the country, including Easter, Passover, and Ramadan, as well as commemorations for Holocaust Remembrance Day.