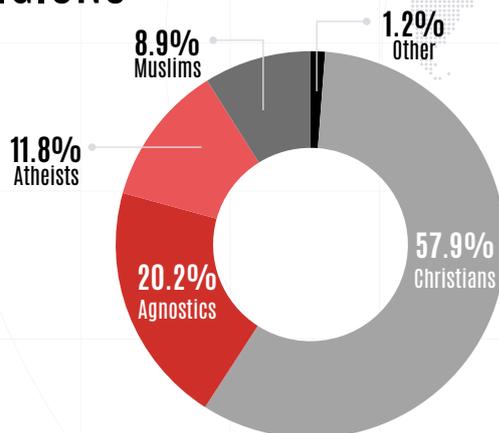




SWEDEN

RELIGIONS



LEGAL FRAMEWORK ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND ACTUAL APPLICATION

The Swedish Constitution guarantees freedom of worship, defined as “the freedom to practice one’s religion alone or in the company of others,” as a fundamental right.¹ It prohibits discrimination on the basis of religious affiliation (Article 2), as does the Swedish Discrimination Act.² Complaints may be filed with the Discrimination Ombudsman.³

The Church of Sweden has been separated from the state since 2000 and raises revenues by levying a tax on its members.⁴ Recognition or registration of religious groups is not required to carry out religious activities and unregistered faith communities are taxed as non-profit organisations.⁵ Registered groups may, however, raise revenues by collecting contributions through the tax agency⁶ and receiving publicly funded grants.⁷

Freedom of expression may be limited for reasons of security, public order, and public safety, but “particular attention shall be paid to the importance of the widest possible freedom of expression” in “political, religious and cultural matters.”⁸ The penal code prohibit threats

or expressions of contempt for persons based on religious belief.⁹ Police maintain statistics on hate crimes, including religiously motivated hate crimes, and the National Council for Crime Prevention (BRÅ) is responsible for the production of hate crime data, such as hate crime reports published every other year.¹⁰

Instruction covering world religions is required in all public and private schools.¹¹ Religious groups are permitted to establish private schools, provided they meet state curriculum requirements. In January 2020, a governmental report submitted to the Education Ministry proposed new rules for denominational schools, including increased monitoring and a ban on the establishment of new religious schools after 2023.¹² Among the concerns raised in the report was the “lack of clarity regarding religious orientation and religious aspects; difficulties in distinguishing between teaching and education; and voluntariness” in the educational centres.¹³ Commentators observed that politicians had previously admitted that such a “proposal is a proxy for addressing problems of radical Islam” in “certain Muslim schools, which are an exceedingly small minority of the already miniscule number of [mostly Christian] faith-based schools.”¹⁴ Some critics of the proposal noted that establishing and running religious schools is a fundamen-

tal right under European law.¹⁵

Home schooling, including for religious reasons, is not permitted except under “extraordinary circumstances.”¹⁶

In 2019 two municipalities banned the wearing of headscarves in schools either by children or staff (or both), however, those bans were declared unconstitutional violations on religious freedom by an administrative court in November 2020. Both municipalities were planning to appeal at the time of writing.¹⁷

There are legal restrictions on animal slaughter, which provide that animals must be sedated prior to slaughter with no religious exceptions.¹⁸ Circumcision of male individuals is regulated by law. In 2019, the Centre Party announced that it would work towards a ban on male circumcision. This was met with strong criticism from the chairman of the Jewish Central Council, who said “if the proposal is implemented, it will be completely impossible to live either as a Jew or as a Muslim in Sweden.” The chairman of the United Islamic Associations in Sweden denounced the plan saying it was “a restriction on religious freedom. It is a meaningless proposal. Muslims and Jews will not stop circumcising their boys. The only risk is that people will be forced to do so in the shadows.” The party leader later said that no legislation would be proposed.¹⁹ In February 2020, the Church of Sweden issued a statement supporting the right to non-medical religious circumcision performed on boys.²⁰

In 2019, the Discrimination Ombudsman investigated the Bromölla municipality’s ban on prayer during working hours. An administrative court ruled in September 2020 that such a ban violated the fundamental right to religious freedom enshrined in Swedish law and the European Convention on Human Rights.²¹

The Växjö police decision permitting the Muslim call to prayer over loudspeakers once a week for three minutes and 45 seconds was affirmed by the Court of Appeal in Gothenburg in April 2019.²²

In June 2020, the government announced the adoption of “a number of measures to combat antisemitism and increase security,” including involvement and dialogue with Jewish community organisations and the Malmö International Forum on Holocaust Remembrance and Combating Antisemitism. Several of the measures were a continuation of the existing national plan against rac-

ism and hate crime. A special envoy for intercultural and interfaith dialogue, including for international efforts to combat anti-Semitism and Islamophobia at international level, is based at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The special envoy “works to enhance coordination of intergovernmental efforts and strengthen Sweden’s cooperation with key international stakeholders and international Jewish organisations.”²³ In 2020, the first municipal coordinator against anti-Semitism in schools was hired in Malmö.²⁴

In March 2019, the Swedish government announced it would grant refugee status to all Uyghur Muslim asylum seekers from China, indicating that the religious minority was automatically considered at risk of persecution. Carl Bexelius, the deputy legal director at the Swedish Migration Board said that what “we have seen is that it is a fairly far-reaching state repression...where you can arrest and detain people without actual criminal charges”.²⁵

INCIDENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

The security situation in Sweden was the subject of several news reports in 2018 and 2019, particularly relating to the stark rise in mostly gang-related violent crime in some areas, particularly low-income, vulnerable suburbs of the biggest cities: Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö and the use of explosives, including improvised devices, guns, and hand grenades. As reported by the BBC: “for criminologist Amir Rostami, who has researched the use of hand grenades in Sweden, the only relevant comparison is Mexico, plagued by gang violence. ‘This is unique in countries that pretty much don’t have a war or don’t have a long history of terrorism.’”²⁶

The most recent hate crime data available covered the year 2018 and saw an 11 percent rise in overall hate crime from 2016, with the largest increases in xenophobic/racist and anti-Semitic crimes. The breakdown in hate crime motives for 2018 included 4 percent with an anti-Semitic motive, 4 percent with an anti-Christian motive, and 8 percent with an anti-Muslim motive.²⁷

Related to Anti-Semitism

According to a 2018 survey of 1,193 Jewish respondents in Sweden by the European Fundamental Rights Agency, 82 percent considered anti-Semitism to be “a

very big or a fairly big problem” in their country and 81 percent thought that it had increased over the past five years.²⁸ 40 percent of the respondents said that the perpetrator of the most serious incident they experienced in the past five years was “someone with a Muslim extremist view, 27% - as someone with a left-wing political view.” 81 percent of respondents believed that the government’s efforts to combat anti-Semitism were ineffective.²⁹

In October 2018, a Jewish politician’s house was set on fire in Lund, a few months after another member of the Jewish community’s house had also been targeted. “There is strong suspicion that these attacks are targeted against these people because they are Jews. The [October 2018] incident has the extra dimension of an attempt to intimidate a politician into silence,” said the president of the Council of Swedish Jewish Communities.³⁰

The Gothenburg synagogue was the victim of a Molotov cocktail attack in 2017 after the U.S. President recognised Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Three men were convicted of the crime and in 2019, the Supreme Court upheld a Migration Agency decision to deport them to Palestine.³¹

Related to Islam

According to the chairman of the board of the Islamic Association Stockholm Mosque, mosques in Stockholm increased their security surveillance after the 2019 terrorist attack in Norway. He said mosques are regularly vandalised and that “Islamophobia is growing.”³²

In August 2020, there were riots in the city of Malmö after a video circulated of followers of a far-right Danish politician setting fire to a copy of the Quran during a rally near one of the city’s mosques. The politician had been denied permission to hold an anti-Islamic protest and banned from entering the country.³³

Related to Christianity

In 2018, there were six anti-Christian incidents reported by civil society groups to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe for inclusion in the annual hate crime report, including a physical attack against a Christian convert after attending a Pentecostal service, and the vandalism of churches.³⁴ One incident was reported in 2019: an arson attack on a Syrian Orthodox church with an explosive device. This was the second such attack on the church in one year.³⁵ The Observa-

tory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe reported graffiti with the words “jihad” spray painted on two churches in 2018,³⁶ and repeated arson attacks on Syrian Orthodox churches with incendiary devices in 2018, 2019, and 2020.³⁷

In January 2021, a church in Spånga was hit with two arson attacks in four days, the first involving the use of Molotov cocktails. According to reports, the Spånga church is located between Tensta and Rinkeby, two of Stockholm’s most “socio-economically vulnerable” areas where a “majority of the residents have a foreign background.” The church’s pastor said “in these areas, people are more aware that this is a symbolically negative act. You are more sensitive to churches and holy places when you come from regions where religion plays a greater role.”³⁸

In March 2019, the results of a study analysing the asylum claims from 2015-2018 of 619 Afghan converts to Christianity concluded that “the Swedish Migration Board has a weak understanding of religion and conversion which lacks scientific grounding. [Its] decisions show unreasonable differences between comparable entities, leading to arbitrary decisions. [Its] praxis is not based on reliable methodology, leading to inconsistent motivations for decisions. The Swedish Migration Board does not comply sufficiently with international law and human rights conventions, leading to a lack of legal security.”³⁹ The research revealed that 68 percent of the converts in the study were denied asylum on the grounds that their faith was “not judged to be genuine” despite “proven involvement in church life.” The study indicated that often the differences in negative or positive decisions by the Migration Board could “be traced to the convert’s intellectual ability to reflect on his or her faith, with the result that it is the intellectual capacity, rather than the faith, of the convert that is judged.”⁴⁰

Related to Covid-19

The Swedish government limited religious gatherings to 50 people during much of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. However, since November 2020, that number was reduced to eight people and many of the churches, synagogues and mosques voluntarily closed.⁴¹

PROSPECTS FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

While it appears there were no significant new or in-

creased governmental restrictions on religious freedom in Sweden during the period under review, there appears to be an increased risk of societal intolerance against both majority and minority religions, some of which may be as a result of global terrorism or geopolitical conflicts attributed to religious groups, as well as anti-immigration sentiments in Sweden. The prospects for the exercise of this fundamental right are challenging but remain positive.

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