

Freedom of religion or belief in Sweden

Governmental restrictions on freedom of religion or belief

Sweden has a very short history of religious freedom. Until 1951 Swedes were obliged to belong to one of a limited number of state approved religious communities. The ban on Catholic convents was lifted during the 1970s and people born in Sweden were, at birth, automatically made members of the Church of Sweden until the 1980s (those not wishing to belong had to register this). On the 1 January 2000 the Lutheran Church of Sweden ceased to be the state church.

Despite this short history there is today a very low level of state restrictions on FORB. Exceptions to this are:

- Kosher/halal slaughter has been banned since the 1930s. A modified version of Halal slaughter is permitted and accepted by most Muslims but not by Jews. There is however no prohibition on the import of Kosher meat. There is strong public opinion against kosher/halal slaughter, motivated by strong support for animal rights.
- There is no legal right to conscientious objection to participation in abortion for health care workers. However the small number of health care workers who do wish to conscientiously object can normally be accommodated in informal ways in agreement with colleagues at the local level.

Public pressure for further governmental restrictions:

- There is a vocal campaign for the banning of the circumcision of small boys. This is backed by many actors including the humanist association, child rights organisations and organisations of physicians and pediatricians. The minister in charge has indicated a clear refusal to ban circumcision. Public opinion is increasingly against circumcision from a child rights perspective.
- Debates about niqabs and burkas have taken place in the media intermittently, largely in connection with other European countries introducing restrictions upon these. The Swedish government has been clear that it will not introduce general

restrictions, although it is possible that the state may in future introduce restrictions in relation to teachers/pupils in state schools.

The terror attack in Oslo/Utöya has highlighted the need for the security services to more closely monitor the activities of anti-islamic groups, and this threat appears now to be being taken seriously.

Social restrictions on the freedom of religion or belief

- Discrimination and harassment are problems faced by many religious Jews and Muslims, in particular those who wear religious clothing, with verbal abuse, spitting and occasional assaults occurring. Increasing harassment of Jews in the city of Malmö has been highlighted in the media recently. There are also concerns about ghettoization – for example that Christians from the Middle East avoid living in Rinkeby where Muslims form a large group for fear of harassment and that Muslims avoid living in Södertälje by where there is a large community of Christians from the Middle East for the same reason.
- The issue of the building of mosques is somewhat controversial, with the nationalist party (Sverigedemokraterna) in one case organizing a petition calling for a local referendum to decide on whether a mosque should be allowed or not. Debates about foreign financing of mosques have also arisen. The government has refused to ban foreign financing. A survey from 2009 shows that 42% of the population are somewhat in favour of restrictions on the building of mosques and that 32% are somewhat in favour of restrictions on the building of free (non-Lutheran) churches. These figures are concerning.
- A survey from 2009 indicates that 30% of employers would prefer not to employ people who wear religious symbols and that 40% of employers absolutely do not want employees who wear religious symbols. Unsurprisingly there is widespread discrimination in recruitment processes, which contravenes discrimination legislation, but is hard for the individual to prove.
- There has been one publicly reported incident of death threats towards converts to Christianity from Islam in the last year.
- Attitudes to freedom of religion or belief are a concern. Many people understand freedom of religion or belief as a protection only for religious people rather than as a protection for all. Religious freedom often arises in the media in situations where it is understood to be in conflict with other rights such as women's rights, HBTQ

rights or animal rights (e.g. Church of Sweden priests who object to women priests or to same sex marriage, Muslim men who refuse to shake hands with women, parents who refuse sex education for children). There is strong support for women's rights, HBTQ rights and animal rights in Sweden. Freedom of religion or belief is therefore often perceived as a less important human right that primarily appears to protect conservative religious people to whom many Swedes feel they cannot relate. There is a need to improve people's knowledge and understanding of the value of freedom of religion or belief for both individuals and societies.

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