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Financing of religion: Jehovah's Witnesses in the crosshairs

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (04.29.2024) - The government of Sweden is drafting new legislation revising the Act on State Grants to Religious Communities. Framing the bill as providing "clearer democracy criteria," the government is in fact crafting the language to potentially target Jehovah's Witnesses.

This is in harmony with former Secretary of State for the Ministry of Culture Nina Andersson's comments during an SVT program: "The current legislation [on state grants] has obviously not worked [since Jehovah's Witnesses are eligible to receive state grants]. Therefore, we will also turn to the parliament with new legislation in this area to correct this."

From 11 to 20 October 2023, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Nazila Ghanea, visited Sweden to investigate the following issues and make recommendations:

National laws, policies, institutions and practices
Pressure on the public manifestation of religion or belief
Engaging with and support to religion and belief communities
Education on religion
Discrimination of the basis of religion or belief
Instances of religious or belief intolerance
Challenges arising in the context of immigration and asylum seekers
Conscientious objection
The situation of Muslims
The situation of Jews
The situation of Sámi people
Conclusions

The UN Special Rapporteur about the financing of religions

In her "*Preliminary observations and recommendations*" in October 2023, Ms Nazila Ghanea said:

"Sweden's offer of access to numerous funding streams and grants to facilitate the work of religious communities needs to be recognised as a good practice. This also includes the public support of some faith schools.

Funds are distributed to 24 communities at the *national* level through the Swedish Agency for Support to Faith Committees (SST). The SST notes that the distribution of

funds to these faith communities is in recognition of the important role of religious diversity.

Not all faith communities avail themselves of these grants and funds, and there is oversight over the dispersal of such funds. Funds to *local* faith communities are primarily dispersed by (independent) municipalities.

Funds to the Church of Sweden operate differently, in light of the fact that it constituted the state church until 2000, the responsibilities that still accrue to it, and the numerous buildings and sites it maintains.

Faith communities have concerns that the political environment is making access to funds more precarious and that they are insufficient for the range of their needs and activities, and even their possibility of meeting in safety and security.”

EUREL about the financing of religions

Since 1 January 2000, it is possible for all officially registered and acknowledged faith communities to have their membership fees levied by the state via the tax system. This service is free for the Church of Sweden as part of the disestablishment agreement between state and church. Other faith communities have to pay for it, but receive, on the other hand, a general financial state support which is not offered to the Church of Sweden.

EUREL (Sociological and legal data on religions in Europe and beyond) states that 47 faith communities are currently receiving state grants which are of three different kinds:

- 1) Organisational grants enabling provision of religious services, pastoral care and education,
- 2) Project grants of three kinds; a) for the building of new premises or to adapt premises for handicapped people, b) for the cost of education abroad of pastors, imams, etc. aimed to serve a faith community in Sweden, c) for the initial work to establish a faith community of recently arrived immigrants,
- 3) Grants directed to support specific activities that the state wishes to subsidise, e.g. hospital chaplaincy and theological training at certain theological colleges.

Figures from the year 2019 show that 8 million Euro were distributed in state support to minority faith communities. The major part consists of the organisational grants which are distributed according to an estimate of the number of people that the respective faith community serves; a figure which may include more people than the actual members.

In 2019, organisational and project grants were distributed (in thousand euros) to the Pentecostal parishes in cooperation (1000), Eumenia Church (900), the Roman Catholic Church (900), Inter Act (Evangeliska Frikyrkan) (370), seven Muslim organisations (1300), National Evangelical Missionary Society (EFS) (250), eighteen Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox Churches (1150), Swedish Alliance Mission (163), Mandaean Community (80), Buddhist Cooperative Council of Sweden (76), eight minor Christian denominations (176), Official Council of Swedish Jewish Communities (55), Salvation Army (55), Alevi association (28), The Adventist Church (23) (Nämnden för statligt stöd till trossamfund, SST. Utbetalda statsbidrag 2019).

The case of Jehovah's Witnesses

In her final [report](#) (A/HRC/55/47/Add.2) presented on 1 March 2024 at the 55th session of the UN Human Rights Council, Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief

Nazila Ghanea wrote in the section titled "Engaging with and support to religion and belief communities:

"There is no legal requirement in Sweden for religious groups to register or seek recognition. However, only faith communities registered with the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agencies (*Kammarkollegiet*) are eligible to receive government funding and tax exemptions similar to those of nonprofit organizations. Such registration requires that the group fulfills requirements including that it has operated in the country for at least five years, has a clear and stable structure, can function independently, serves at least 3,000 persons, and has several locations in the country. The Rapporteur notes that Jehovah's Witnesses were only registered in 2019 after an extensive 12-year litigation and subsequently awarded compensation by the Chancellor of Justice in 2021. As of January 2024, the Swedish Humanists (*Humanisterna*) have been accepted as a life-stance organization."

On 6 August 2007, Jehovah's Witnesses applied to the Swedish government to register in order to receive state grants. During the next ten years, the government repeatedly turned down their requests. Its decisions were successfully challenged three times in the Supreme Administrative Court of Sweden.

On 24 October 2019, after 12 years of legal battle, the government finally had to acknowledge Jehovah's Witnesses' right to state grants, admitting that they fulfil all requirements. In addition, on 21 October 2021, the Chancellor of Justice awarded them damages amounting to SHE 8,510,000 [USD 886,000] recognizing that the process had been unjustifiably long and thus in violation of Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

However, new legislative initiatives threaten this progress achieved.

Religious statistics

According to the [Church of Sweden statistics 2020](#), 55% of the population (5,7 million) are members of their Evangelical-Lutheran Church.

According to government statistics and estimates by religious groups, other Christian groups, including the Roman Catholic Church, Pentecostal Movement, Missionary (or Missions) Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), together total less than 6 percent of the population.

The Finnish Orthodox Church and Georgian Orthodox Church are also present in the country. According to a 2016 Pew Research Center estimate (the most recent available), 8.1 percent of the population is Muslim.

According to the Official Council of Swedish Jewish Communities, Jews number approximately 15,000.

Humanists Sweden, the largest humanist organization, claimed in 2016 to have 4,500 members.

Smaller religious communities include Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Mandaeans, and members of the Church of Scientology, Word of Faith, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (Unification Church).

Persecution of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light

By Willy Fautré, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers

HRWF (26.04.2024) - During the years spanning 2019 to 2022, a group of 170 believers in the religious minority, the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, faced severe religious discrimination at the hands of Swedish authorities.

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light (not to be confused with the Ahmadiyya Community founded in the 19th century by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad within a Sunni context, with which it has no relations) is a new religious movement that finds its roots in Twelver Shia Islam.

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light, established in 1999, has faced grave persecution in Muslim majority countries due to its progressive beliefs. Labelled as "heretics" and "infidels," members have endured imprisonment, torture, and targeted attacks in Muslim-majority countries for their inclusive stance on homosexuality and alcohol, belief that the headscarf is not mandatory and that the true location of the Kaaba is in Petra (Jordan), not Saudi Arabia.

The release of their gospel "The Goal of the Wise," authored by the head of the religious group, Aba Al-Sadiq, escalated state-sponsored persecution in countries like [Algeria](#), [Iran](#), [Iraq](#), Egypt, [Malaysia](#) and Turkey, prompting intervention from human rights organisations, [UN bodies](#), Amnesty International and Human Rights Without Frontiers. Additionally [The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF) has also documented their persecution. Human rights abuses were also highlighted in a discussion at the [European Parliament](#).

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light first welcome in Sweden

The faith was already officially registered under the name of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light with the relevant government body in Sweden in 2018. Its property was legally registered and obtained an organisation number from the Swedish Tax Agency. The group declared that it would use the facility for services falling under tax code section number 94.910 which is titled "Activities of a Religious Community".

The property, located in a serene landscape was used exactly for that purpose. It was frequented by men, women, and children and provided summer retreats, youth activities and computer training courses for its members. It also offered meditation classes, religious education, English, Arabic and Swedish language courses. It was used as a house of worship as any church, temple, synagogue or mosque.

Sudden and unexplainable about-face of Sweden

In 2019, the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light suddenly started to encounter a relentless campaign of harassment by the Swedish Police Authority, clearly aimed at impeding its establishment within the country.

These operations targeted both the religious community itself and its members, with the clear objective of dismantling its presence. Reports revealed collaborative efforts between the Police Authority and other governmental bodies like the Migration Agency, the Tax Agency, and the Enforcement Authority, branding the faith as unwelcome in Swedish society. This campaign of persecution by the Swedish government started after

unfounded and unproven allegations from some disgruntled ex-members and accusations from Islamic extremists who wished to destroy the group.

As Sweden is known to be open to asylum-seekers persecuted in their country of origin, some scholars in religious studies who know this religious community and have examined the list of documented incidents are very perplexed by the strange behaviour of the Swedish authorities.

Some think that the Swedish institutions in charge of national security may have received an (unfounded) warning from a Muslim majority country hostile to this new liberal Muslim movement which is against any form of violence and whose values are in line with Western values.

Police raids

The first incident of police harassment towards the faith occurred in Bergslagsgarden on September 10, 2020, when over 20 police officers descended upon the faith's premises, accompanied by a fleet of over seven police vehicles and a contingent of SWAT officers clad in combat gear.

The sudden and overwhelming police presence shocked and terrified the families present, including children, who were then confined to the property by the police force. Despite requests for explanation and a search permit, the police failed to provide any legal document.

Members were detained and access to various areas of the property was restricted without reason. This resulted in the fact that several parents were unable to pick up their children from school and a number of them, as young as 7-8 years, were left unsupervised on the school grounds for over an hour. The police did not find any evidence of illegal activity and withdrew without arresting anyone, interviewing anyone or even fining anyone. No reason was ever given for their operation.

On November 18, 2020, the community was met by yet another unanticipated arrival of four police officers, accompanying Fire Safety Inspectors. Despite objections raised by members, who recalled the previous encounter, the police officers persisted in escorting the inspectors onto the premises. No breach of the fire regulations was discovered. It can reasonably be presumed that the presence of the police was meant to immediately close the premises of the religious centre if the law had not been respected.

In both of the raids the police found nothing suspicious or illegal and did not conduct a single interview.

A Wave of Police Harassment on Individual Members

In parallel, other harassment operations were carried out. On May 14, 2020 British citizens Fawad Haider and Ali Abbas found themselves at the receiving end of police aggression during a routine traffic stop in the Örebro region. Despite complying with identification requests, their car window was violently shattered. They were detained and questioned but were eventually released without charge or explanation.

On January 11, 2022 Swedish police conducted raids on the residences of Ahmadi religion members who were US citizens, resulting in emotional distress for those involved, including mentally disabled children. No evidence of any illegal activity was uncovered.

On April 11, 2022 under false pretences, UK citizen Kalsoom Shah and her daughter Duae Zahra were summoned to the Örebro police station. The mother and daughter were separated and interrogated while their lawyer was prevented from being present. They were asked intrusive questions about their beliefs and 17-year old Dua was even offered an option to leave her family, which she declined.

On June 14, 2022 Guillaume Ballet, Ali Haider, and Lela Lotfi - Swiss, British, and Egyptian citizens - were stopped in traffic by two undercover cars, two police vans, and one motorcycle. The disproportionately large number of police vehicles was suggestive of a planned yet unwarranted ambush of the group.

They were forced to abandon their vehicle leaving it unlocked and unattended. Guillaume Ballet and Ali Haider were detained and subjected to degrading and humiliating body searches, prolonged interrogations and psychological pressure. Nothing illegal was discovered.

Lela Lotfy was left in a field 11 kilometres away from her residence and with no transportation or means to contact anyone. Guillaume Ballet and Ali Haider were forced to take a drug test. The results were negative.

The Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light considers that the rights of their members, guaranteed by the Swedish Constitution and the European Convention on Human Rights, have been seriously and repeatedly violated. In all the aforementioned cases, the police operations were unfounded, unnecessary and disproportionate.

Residency Rejections and Legal Battles

Despite residing in Sweden legally, all members of the Ahmadi Religion of Peace and Light encountered significant obstacles when applying for residency. However, following the UK's Brexit, the residency status of 69 members with British citizenship was adversely affected.

Numerous members faced rejection of their applications by the Swedish Migration Agency under controversial circumstances. For example, in November 2020, the applications of spouses and children of four employees of the Ahmadi Religion were unjustly rejected.

Legal appeals ensued, with migration lawyer Julia Högberg expressing shock at the lack of legal grounds for the initial rejections. While subsequent court rulings overturned some decisions, the prolonged legal battles drained resources and morale, prompting many members to relocate to the United Kingdom.

Prejudices of the Police and Other State Institutions

On April 29, 2023, the Swedish Radio released an interview with the head of the Police Intelligence Service in Bergslagen, Mr. Per Lundbäck. In the interview, he revealed that the Police had worked with the Migration Agency, the Tax Agency and the Swedish enforcement authority to dismantle the Ahmadi Religion and expel its members.

He described the religious group as a "cult" that they "did not want in their vicinity". It was then decided to shut down the faith community in Sweden because they had "a feeling" that something was not right.

Additionally, businesses operated by members of the faith that were positively covered in local news in Sweden were described by the chief of police in the radio interview as a "sham." Statements like this were not only invalid but also profoundly harmful to the

reputation of the religious community whose members are already bearing the brunt of persecution in Muslim-majority countries. Consequently, due to the actions of the Swedish police, the businesses and lives of many members of the faith in Sweden were ruined and uprooted for no valid reason.

The statements of Police Chief Per Lundbäck are alarming on many levels as they are a blatant confession by the Swedish authorities that several of its government bodies engaged together in an unfounded and illegal act of direct discrimination against a religious minority and its members, such as the rejection of residency applications, which is unlawful and unconstitutional.

As a conclusion, the interview suggests that the Police Authority has actively worked to find "something" that could justify the termination of the faith's activities in Sweden, seemingly based on a pure "feeling."

Quran-burning Iraqi man faces an expulsion order

He plans to seek asylum in Norway

[AP News](#) (27.03.2024) — An Iraqi man who carried out several Quran burnings in Sweden told a newspaper on Wednesday that he would seek asylum in neighboring Norway in the wake of a deportation order by authorities in Stockholm.

Salwan Momika, 37, has staged several burnings and desecrations of the sacred book of Islam in Sweden over the past few years.

"I am on my way to Norway," Momika said in an interview published Wednesday by Swedish tabloid Expressen. "Sweden only accepts terrorists who are granted asylum and given protection, while philosophers and thinkers are expelled."

Videos of Momika's provocative Quran burnings got worldwide publicity and raised anger and criticism in several Muslim nations, leading to riots and unrest in many places. He is currently being investigated by Swedish authorities for incitement against ethnic groups in Sweden.

According to Expressen, Momika is one of the reasons why Sweden's NATO membership, which was finalized earlier this month, got delayed by months. Among other countries, his actions got wide publicity in NATO member Turkey, which vetoed Stockholm's bid to join the military alliance for a lengthy period.

Sweden's migration authorities revoked Momika's residence permit in October, saying he had provided incorrect information on his application and he would be deported to Iraq. But his deportation has been on hold for security reasons, because according to Momika, his life could be in danger if he were returned to his native country.

Swedish media reported that Momika was granted a residence permit in 2021. In connection with last year's deportation decision, Momika was granted a new temporary residence permit that expires on April 16, according to Expressen.

"I am moving to a country that welcomes me and respects me. Sweden doesn't respect me," Momika told the newspaper, adding that he had already entered Norway and was on his way to the capital, Oslo.

There was no immediate comment available from Norwegian authorities.
