

# Norway and Islam

Considered one of the states with the highest level of welfare in the world, Norway has secured a globally respected position through its image as a state of peace. Despite such seemingly positive image, Norway stands out as a state which earns millions of dollars from the arms trade, seeks to have a share of the new energy reserves located in the polar zone, and sometimes follows discriminatory policies against people with different religious and ethnic backgrounds in the country.

This study gives a general overview of the current status of Norway and Norway's Muslim minority. The study attempts to objectively address when the Muslim groups started arriving in Norway, their socioeconomic status, political exposure and the problems faced within the country.

## Overview

Norway is the most northerly country in the Scandinavian Peninsula, Northern Europe's northernmost region. Its land border neighbors are Sweden to the east and northeast, and Finland and Russia in the northeast. To the west lies the Norwegian Sea, which means the country has an Atlantic coastline. Norway's population is 5,124,000 and the official religion is Protestant Lutheranism. Christianity spread to Norway following the Norwegian King Haakon Haakonsson's conversion in the 11th century and has been country's predominant religion ever since. 89% of the population identify as Norwegian or Saami, while the rest is composed of different ethnic groups.

Norway was dominated by a people called the Vikings in the 8th-11th centuries. Governed as an associated state with Denmark from 1321-1814, Norway was under Swedish rule from 1814-1905. The country proclaimed its independence in 1905.

## History of Islam in the Region

Norway's first contact with Islam is considered to have occurred when King Haakon Haakonsson sent an envoy with substantial gifts to Tunis in 1260, to which the Sultan of Tunis reciprocated by sending an envoy to Norway. But the first significant Muslim migration to Norway only came as recently as the 1960s. Like other European countries, by 1970, Norway had received a significant amount of labor migration. The Gulf War in the 1990s along with the Balkan Wars increased the number of Muslim immigrants arriving in Norway. The country still attracts migrants thanks to its living standards and job opportunities.

We can group the reasons behind Muslim migration to Norway under two different categories: Migrants from countries such as Pakistan, Turkey, and Morocco move for economic reasons, whereas migrants from countries such as Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan move to Norway to escape wars, famine, poverty, etc.

Although the exact number of Muslims in the country is not known, according to statistics gathered in 2012 there are about 200,000 Muslims who emigrated from Pakistan (32,700), Somalia (29,400), Iraq (28,900), Iran (17,900), Turkey (16,700), Bosnia and Herzegovina (16,300), Kosovo-Albania (13,700), Afghanistan (13,200), and Morocco (8,600). This means that Muslims constitute 3% of the entire population. Muslims are mostly concentrated in the capital city of Oslo. It is also estimated that some 1,500 ethnic Norwegians have converted to Islam. The most famous Norwegian convert is the writer of the Norwegian national anthem, Henrik Arnold Wergeland (1808-1845).

## Socioeconomic Status of Muslims in Norway

Norway is a cosmopolitan country home to people from diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, integration is a very important issue in the country which seeks to avoid conflicts. Research on immigrants generally avoids identifying the population as Muslim or non-Muslim. Most immigrants in Norway come from Muslim-majority countries, while non-Muslim immigrants mostly come from Vietnam and Sri Lanka.

Education is deemed particularly important for the minorities. We can say fairly that Muslim and Norwegian children receive equal educational opportunities. Considering that Norway boasts a modern and developed education system, the children of Muslim immigrants in the country benefit from the same standards. According to a study conducted with primary school students, one-third of the students are immigrants, of which the majority are from Muslim families. The approval to open primary educational institutions for Muslim children was authorized in May, 2014. A primary school for 220 pupils to be opened in East Oslo, where Muslims are concentrated, will be the first and only school exclusive to Muslims. The decision to go ahead with the school sparked major controversy in the country as it is argued that it could slow down integration.

Norway boasts high living standards for its citizens. Both employment opportunities and social benefits for the unemployed are at a high level. According to research conducted by the Norwegian Statistics Bureau from 2005-2006, Muslim immigrants are employed in the following fields: 19% in academic and administrative occupations, 58% in skilled work sectors (marketing, service industry, seafaring, etc.), and 17% in unskilled work. Immigrants with the lowest income level are from Iraq and Somalia. Based on the numeric data we can see that immigrants/Muslims face discrimination at work, albeit to a small extent.

According to the 2005 data, 67% of Muslim immigrants have acquired Norwegian citizenship, 6% have applied for citizenship, and 14% intend to apply for citizenship later. Within these findings, it is seen that the rate of Iraqi and Somali immigrants becoming citizens is below average. When Muslim and non-Muslim immigrants are compared, more non-Muslim immigrants are given citizenship than the former.

Based on the 2009 data, Muslims in Norway run more than 90 associations. The majority of these associations are located in Oslo. Their members number in the region of 80,000. In a survey conducted in 2012, 60% of Muslims in Norway stated that they were a member of an Islamic association or foundation. National and sectarian differences play a major role in the establishment of these associations. Muslims from a common ethnicity or sect generally gather together in the same association.

The Islamic Council Norway, which groups all Muslim associations under its roof, was founded in 1993. The council works to protect the rights of Muslims as well as to contribute to the Christian-Muslim dialog in the country. According to a survey, of the Muslims who stated that Islam constituted an important part of their lives, Pakistani, Somali, and Turkish immigrants were the most active in the activities organized by the associations, while Bosnian and Iranian Muslims were the least active.

## **Political Exposure of Muslims in Norway**

Norway is a constitutional monarchy based on the principle of parliamentary democracy. King Harald V has been the incumbent monarch since his father King Olav V died in January 17, 1991. Although the king's political powers are quite limited, the people's commitment to the king is high. Executive power is held by the cabinet of 20 ministers under the administration of the king and the prime minister. Despite having become a NATO member on April 4, 1949, Norway refused EU membership following the referendums in the years of 1972 and 1994. The latest elections in the country took place on September 9, 2013. Even though the Labor Party received the highest number of votes in the latest elections, the decrease in votes for the party, as well as for its partner leftist parties in the coalition, resulted in its loss of majority in parliament. The real winner of the elections was the Conservative Party, which increased its share of the vote to 9.6%, and won 18 more seats in parliament compared to the previous term.

Muslim immigrants who have acquired Norwegian citizenship hold equal civil rights, and they tend to vote for leftist parties mostly. The reason to this is that leftist parties follow more liberal and egalitarian ideologies. The Conservative Party does not attract the Muslim vote as it does not favor Islamic expansion in and Muslim immigration to Norway. Muslims in Norway prefer to get involved in politics within the parties that promise certain rights to them, rather than founding their own political parties. When discussing Muslims in Norway and their political involvement, Hadia Tajik, a Norwegian of Pakistani-descent who became the youngest and the first Muslim minister in the Labor Party government in 2012, deserves a mention. The ultra right-wing terrorist Anders B. Breivik who murdered 77 people when attacking a Labor youth camp in 2011 may have been a factor in Tajik's election as the minister. Apart from that, although the number is not enough to represent the Muslim population in the country, there are some Muslims in parliament. Pakistani immigrants are more involved in Norwegian politics than other ethnic groups.

## Problems Faced by Muslims

As with all countries in the West, 9/11 was a turning point in terms of the problems faced by Muslims in Norway. Since then, profiling and unjust practices that used to be carried out in secret have become common place. Discrimination against Muslims in Norway has found its way into the Center for International Human Rights' reports. For a time Muslims faced abuse, with everything they hold dear endangered. Of the attacks against Muslims in Norway, the incident that took Muslims to the streets was when desecrating caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad were published. The offensive caricature was printed in a publication in Norway, about three months after its publication in Denmark in September, 2005. Again in February, 2010 the Norwegian Police Security Services (PST) shared a caricature insulting the Prophet Muhammad on the fan page of their social website. *Aftenposten*, one of the biggest newspapers in the country, and another major newspaper, *Dagbladet*, both disrespected the Prophet Muhammad by publishing the same caricature on their front page in an attempt to provoke the Muslim community. Another incident evidencing the unfair treatment of Muslims in Norway is the experience of Keltoum Hasnaoui Missoum, 23, in Oslo. Missoum, who wears a headscarf, applied to the Norwegian Police Academy to become a policewoman. In the beginning she was accepted, but was then rejected on the pretext that there may be later reactions.

According to the 2009 assessment report by the Norwegian Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi), within the year the printed media published 77,000 news articles featuring the words "Islam" or "Muslim". Among these articles, 82% had negative content, while only 18% was partially unbiased or positive. The report remarked that the Norwegian media is fueling Islamophobia, and included striking conclusions on the recent increase in "Islamophobia" by laying the emphasis on the media's role in manipulating the people's behavior towards minorities. The statement by IMDi director Osmund Kaldheim saying, "The media prefers to highlight the headscarf ban and Islamophobia than talking about the good ways in which the Muslims have tried to integrate", summarizes the situation accurately. As much as 71% of news related to immigration and integration in the media exhibits "a problematic and negative" approach, while 18% of articles fall into the "solution-oriented positive" and 11% into the "unbiased" categories. The report also states that the media's commentary on immigration and integration portrays Islam and Muslims as a trouble-making factor, and that one-third of the columns and articles talking about this matter discuss Islam. The report says that the media is trying to create a negative image of Muslims by using terms such as "stealth Islamization" or "radical Islam", and contending the headscarf ban too often.

A private school exclusively for the children of Muslim immigrants in Norway was rejected by Oslo Town Council, which indicates the severity of the inequality against Muslims. The town council justified the rejection by stating that there was a "possibility that pupils in this school could come into contact with people with radical views". While there are 200,000 Muslims living in the country of 5 million in total, Muslims are not allowed to practice halal slaughter. The Norwegian government, which condones the brutal killing of seals for their fur, does not allow halal slaughter on the grounds that it is cruel (!).

In addition to all of the above, the Breivik case, which resulted in 77 deaths, as the culminating point of hatred towards Muslims and immigration, is an important example of what can happen when discriminatory and racist policies are applied. That such incident took place in Norway, one of the most democratic countries in Europe, must be seen as a lesson to all European countries.

## Conclusion

Despite all the negativity, Norway is one of the most livable Western countries for Muslims. But in spite of its social, economic and democratic development, Norway has difficulty in accepting both Islam and other ethnic groups/cultures. In this respect, Norway is especially important in testing whether the West can actually embrace Islam or not. If Norway, with its all transparent, peaceful and democratic structure, cannot embrace Islam, then this means that other countries cannot either.

The living standards of Muslims in Norway can be considered good. And they are not stuck within the working class in Norway as they are in other European countries. Increasing Muslim involvement in politics and investing in an educated young population will ensure more rights and freedoms in the future. Once the Norwegian community has embraced Muslims, it seems that discriminatory and racist policies will be lessened.

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