

Sweden

Sweden is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy. Sweden is a member of the EU and the UN but has declined NATO membership. The country has a social welfare system providing education and health care to all its citizens and ranks very highly on the UN Human Development Report.

Constitution and government	Education and children’s rights	Family, community, society, religious courts and tribunals	Freedom of expression advocacy of humanist values
<u>There is a religious tax or tithing which is compulsory, or which is state-administered and discriminates by precluding non-religious groups</u>			
	<u>No formal discrimination in education</u>	<u>No religious tribunals of concern, secular groups operate freely, individuals are not persecuted by the state</u>	<u>No fundamental restrictions on freedom of expression or advocacy of humanist values</u>

Legend

Constitution and government

The constitution and other laws and policies protect freedom of religion or belief, as well as the freedoms of expression, association and assembly.

The Church of Sweden ceased to be the established state church in 2000, and Sweden is a highly secular country (a Gallup Poll in 2016 found that 18% of Swedes identify themselves as atheist and 55% as non-religious).

Religious membership fees

The government operates a scheme allowing approved religious groups (and not secular belief groups) to collect membership “fees” through the tax system. The Church of Sweden in particular benefits from this scheme. Until 1996, Swedes were automatically registered as a member of the church based on parents’ membership. From 1996 membership has been dependent on baptism. <kulturkraftsyd.se/fods-man-in-i-svenska-kyrkan/>

Whether assumed to be a member under the previous parental assumption of membership, or baptized post-1996, it is possible to retire membership of the Church of Sweden. <svenskakyrkan.se/medlem/uttrade_ur_svenska_kyrkan>

Members of other approved religious groups, including some non-Christian minorities, also have the right to a tax deductible membership fee paid through the tax system, but only “faith communities”

(*Trossamfundet*) are listed. There does not appear to be any provision for secular belief or organizations representing non-religious worldviews to gain equal recognition. Members of approved religious groups must apply to their religious groups (not the government) in order to stop paying fees to the religious group.

<skatteverket.se/privat/skatter/arbeteochinkomst/skattetabeller/avgifttillandratrossamfund.4.18e1b10334ebe8bc80005629.html>

Freedom of expression, advocacy of humanist values

Freedom of speech is guaranteed by law and respected in practice.

Chapter 16 Section 8 of the penal code criminalizes “A person who, in a disseminated statement or communication, threatens or expresses contempt for a national, ethnic or other such group of persons with allusion to race, colour, national or ethnic origin or religious belief”. Analysis suggests that only incitement-to-hatred-type violations would be considered contempt for “religious belief” and therefore this does not constitute a ‘blasphemy’-type law.

Highlighted cases

In 2011, Pakistani refugee **Khalid Saeed** and his family were denied asylum in Sweden, despite verifiable evidence of him being a well-known, outspoken ex-Muslim already exposed to threats, abuse and a significant risk of prosecution by the Pakistani state under Islamic judiciary, and of potential persecution by extremist groups.

<iheu.org/let-khalid-saeed-stay-sweden/>

The Bangladeshi blogger **Ananta Bijoy Das**, shortly before he was killed in Bangladesh in 2015, had applied for a visa to travel to Sweden at the invitation of Swedish PEN (International PEN and its national branches regularly work with writers at genuine risk of persecution). However, Sweden rejected his application, on the grounds that he was unmarried and not wealthy and therefore could not be considered sufficiently “established” in Bangladesh such that he might fail to return. He was killed within weeks. The decision was severely and widely criticised.

<thelocal.se/20150513/sweden-slammed-for-denying-visa-to-murdered-blogger>

<nytimes.com/2015/05/14/world/asia/fearing-bangladeshi-blogger-might-claim-asylum-sweden-blocked-visit-that-could-have-saved-his-life.html>

The position of the Swedish Humanist Association, *Humanisterna*, is that these and other cases may suggest that the Swedish migration authority (*Migrationsverket*) may have considered the non-religious as less exposed to risk of oppression than religious minorities in a similar situation; and that asylum should be granted to atheists from countries where atheism or apostasy is criminalised, or if the authorities in the country of origin fail to defend people’s right to freedom of belief.

Furthermore, asylum should be granted on equal grounds, e.g. an ex-Muslim apostate may have equal or higher need for protection compared to religious minorities.

Mishu Dhar had for several years been receiving threats in the form of phone calls, text messages and emails. In 2015, following the murder of several fellow bloggers in Bangladesh and having received death threats himself, he went to Sweden and applied for asylum. Sweden initially rejected his application. He said at the time, “I am disappointed and scared... If I return to Bangladesh, I can be murdered in the same way as the other bloggers. It is life or death for me.”

<iheu.org/sweden-rejects-asylum-application-for-threatened-bangladeshi-blogger/>

After a campaign by supporters including humanists in Sweden his case was re-evaluated due to

“new circumstances” (which may reflect an update to the country data for Bangladesh held by the Migration board). Two and half years after his initial application, he was granted asylum and a time-limited residency in December 2017.