

# **Jehovah's Witnesses sue Norway after registration revoked**

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—After Norway deregistered the Jehovah's Witnesses last year, some human rights experts say the nation's reputation as a bastion of religious freedom could be in question.

Now, the Jehovah's Witnesses of Norway are suing the state for revoking their national registration and withholding state funds. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, they are the first religious group to lose their national registration in Norway, which recognizes more than 700 faith communities.

The trial, which began Jan. 8, will determine whether some practices of the Jehovah's Witnesses violate Norway's Religious Communities Act or whether withdrawing the Jehovah's Witnesses' registration violates their right to freedom of religion and freedom of association, as guaranteed in the European Convention on Human Rights.

"It's certainly the most important trial about a religious freedom issue in Norway in decades," Willy Fautré, director of the Brussels-based organization Human Rights Without Frontiers, told Religion News Service.

## **Accused of defying Norway's Religious Communities Act**

In January 2022, Valgerd Svarstad Haugland, the county governor of Oslo and Viken, in Norway, denied Jehovah's Witnesses state grants for the year 2021 in response to concerns about what she perceived as exclusionary practices. The Jehovah's Witnesses had received the grants, which currently amount to around \$1.5 million annually, for three decades.

These funds typically are used for international disaster relief work and supporting religious activity in Norway, including translating literature and building kingdom halls, said Jørgen Pedersen, spokesperson for Jehovah's Witnesses in Norway.

The county governor of Oslo and Viken claimed Jehovah's Witnesses are forbidden to contact disfellowshipped members, as well as people who voluntarily dissociate, which can hinder a person's ability to freely withdraw from the group.

She also argued Jehovah's Witnesses may disfellowship children who have chosen to be baptized if they break the religious community's rules, a practice she said constituted "negative social control" and violated children's rights.

These practices, the county governor argued, defy Norway's Religious Communities Act.

"We have assessed the offenses as systematic and intentional, and have therefore chosen to refuse grants," a statement from the county governor said.

## **Clarifying stance on disfellowship**

In an email to RNS, Jehovah's Witnesses spokesperson Jarrod Lopes said Witnesses only disfellowship an unrepentant member who "makes a practice" of serious violations of "the Bible's moral code."

Even then, Lopes added, Jehovah's Witnesses don't force members to limit or cease association with former congregants, whether they've been disfellowshipped or withdrawn voluntarily—that's up to individuals.

"Congregation elders do not police the personal lives of congregants, nor do they exercise control over the faith of individual Jehovah's Witnesses,"

Lopes wrote.

Serious sins that might lead to disfellowship include manslaughter, adultery and drug use, Pedersen explained. A congregation always will try to help an individual restore his or her relationship with God. But if the problem persists, Jehovah's Witnesses feel compelled to respect the entire Bible, including instructions not to associate with unrepentant sinners, such as 1 Corinthians 5:11.

Though the Witnesses appealed the county governor's decision, in September 2022 the Ministry for Children and Families upheld the ruling.

In October that same year, the county governor said in a press release that unless Jehovah's Witnesses would "rectify the conditions that led to the refusal of state subsidies," they would lose registration, which they did a few months later, in December.

Without its national registration, Jehovah's Witnesses cannot perform marriages, and they lose entitlement to government grants.

## **Should the state interpret religious texts?**

The Jehovah's Witnesses of Norway filed two lawsuits against the state in December 2022—one challenging the denial of state grants and another challenging their loss of registration. Those lawsuits have since been combined.

Though the Oslo District Court initially granted the Jehovah's Witnesses an injunction that suspended their deregistration until that case was argued, the Ministry challenged the injunction, and in April 2023, the court removed it.

As the trial plays out at the District Court of Oslo, Jason Wise, an attorney acting as a consultant on the case for the legal team representing the Jehovah's Witnesses in Norway, said part of the Witnesses' argument is that there is no evidence of harm and it's not the place of the state to interpret religious texts.

The state continues to contend that the Jehovah's Witnesses' practices are in conflict with the Religious Communities Act, particularly, they claim, by exposing children to psychological violence.

Since 2022, Jehovah's Witnesses have reported an increase in vandalism, harassment and physical assaults in Norway. In September 2022, two Jehovah's Witnesses in Harstad, Norway, reported that a man screamed at them and repeatedly attempted to hit one of them. That same month, a man in Kristiansand, Norway, reportedly set a Jehovah's Witnesses mobile display car on fire, and a month later, someone attempted to set fire to a Jehovah's Witnesses meeting place in Fauske, Norway.

"What we see now is that the state of Norway is taking a look at my beliefs, saying, we don't like that, we don't like that," said Pedersen. Asking Jehovah's Witnesses to change their beliefs, he said, is a "violation of my integrity as a person, as a religious person, as a person with a conscience. That's the core issue of this case."

Norway isn't the only place where Jehovah's Witnesses' practices have been under scrutiny. In December, the Belgian Court of Cassation—the highest court in the Belgian judiciary—rejected an appeal of a lower court's decision, ruling in favor of Jehovah's Witnesses' right to avoid contact with former members.

"Norway is just the tip of another phenomenon," Fautré said. "That is a source of concern, because we see that there are more and more attempts in Europe by state institutions to interfere and intrude into the teachings

and practices of religious groups, which is forbidden by the European Convention. The risk is they would open the door to more court cases against other religious groups.”