

## Religious Persecution On The Rise Worldwide

**It is both a moral imperative and a wise strategy for the U.S. to encourage global religious freedom.**

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December 10, 2020

To many American Christians, religious liberty appears ever more precarious. While social antagonism is rising, however, the constitutional guarantee to live a life of faith appears strong. The greatest political challenge is the increasing partisan divide, as the Democratic left grows ever more intolerant of any dissent from progressive orthodoxy.

Nevertheless, the challenge to religious believers in the U.S. remains minimal compared to overt hostility evident around the world. Talk of persecution typically brings forth images of the Roman coliseum and Christians being fed to lions, but attacks on people of faith are still real—and often deadly—around the world today. People of goodwill, whatever their faith perspective, should unite on behalf of the fundamental freedom of conscience for people everywhere.

A recent Pew Research Center [report](#) delivered grim news on the state of religious liberty. Stated Pew: “In 2018, the global median level of government restrictions on religion—that is, laws, policies and actions by officials that impinge on religious beliefs and practices—continued to climb, reaching an all-time high since Pew Research Center began tracking these trends in 2007.”

The attack on religious people has been on the rise since 2011. The jump from 2017 to 2018 was particularly noteworthy. Explained Pew: “The increase in government restrictions reflects a wide variety of events around the world, including a rise from 2017 to 2018 in the number of governments using force—such as detentions and physical abuse—to coerce religious groups.” The use of force and violence sets apart overseas persecution from domestic pressure. In some nations simply holding a disfavored belief is sufficient to result in punishment and even death.

Fifty-six nations, more than a quarter of the world’s countries, imposed high or very high restrictions on religious freedom. They were clustered in the Middle East—where nine of ten states strictly limited faithful practice—and the Asia-Pacific, where half of governments did so. The latter is the area of greatest concern: “Asia and the Pacific had the largest increase in its median government restrictions score, rising from 3.8 in 2017 to 4.4 in 2018, partly because a greater number of governments in the region used force against religious groups, including property damage, detention, displacement, abuse and killings.”

The world’s worst oppressor comes from the Asia-Pacific. With North Korea unrated—widely viewed as No.1 persecutor, it is closed to outsiders and thus impossible to accurately evaluate—China takes the dubious prize. Although social hostility toward religion there is moderate, state-directed persecution tops the world. Detailed Pew:

The Chinese government restricts religion in a variety of ways, including banning entire religious groups (such as the Falun Gong movement and several Christian groups), prohibiting certain

religious practices, raiding places of worship and detaining and torturing individuals. In 2018, the government continued a detention campaign against Uighurs, ethnic Kazakhs and other Muslims in Xinjiang province, holding at least 800,000 (and possibly up to 2 million) in detention facilities “designed to erase religious and ethnic identities,” according to the U.S. State Department.

Rounding out the worst 20 are Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Uzbekistan, Burma/Myanmar, Singapore, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Brunei, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Laos, and India. Fourteen of the worst 20 are majority Muslim states. Three are communist dictatorships. One each are radically nationalist Buddhist and Hindu states. One is more generic authoritarian.

India offers an important example of authoritarian democracy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has long fomented violent, even murderous, Hindu nationalism for political gain. Attacks on members of all minority faiths, and especially Muslims, have worsened since he became prime minister. The offenses are serious and widespread. He does not deserve an invitation to the conclave of democratic states that Joe Biden apparently is contemplating.

Of India’s behavior, Pew reported:

anti-conversion laws affected minority religious groups. For example, in the state of Uttar Pradesh in September, police charged 271 Christians with attempting to convert people by drugging them and “spreading lies about Hinduism.” Furthermore, throughout the year, politicians made comments targeting religious minorities. In December, the Shiv Sena Party, which holds seats in parliament, published an editorial calling for measures such as mandatory family planning for Muslims to limit their population growth. And law enforcement officials were involved in cases against religious minorities: In Jammu and Kashmir, four police personnel, among others, were arrested in connection with the kidnapping, rape and killing of an 8-year-old girl from a nomadic Muslim family, reportedly to push her community out of the area.

A very different problem is social hostility toward religious faith. In many countries, such as China, regimes persecute to attain political objectives, such as crushing dissent and opposition. In others, notably majority Islamic nations, popular hostility drives official persecution. Thankfully, social antagonism dropped a bit in 2018. Explained Pew:

The number of countries with “high” or “very high” levels of social hostilities involving religion also declined slightly from 56 (28% of all 198 countries and territories in the study) to 53 (27%). This includes 16 European countries (36% of all countries in Europe), 14 in the Asia-Pacific region (28% of all Asia-Pacific countries) and 11 in the Middle East and North Africa (55% of MENA countries).

The twenty most hateful nations are India, Iraq, Syria, Israel, Nigeria, Libya, Egypt, Pakistan, Central African Republic, Sri Lanka, Somalia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Yemen, Kenya, Malaysia, Palestinian territories, Algeria, and Mali. Fourteen are Muslim-majority states. One is mixed, with predominantly Islamist violence. One each are Buddhist, Hindu, and Jewish nationalist. Two are Christian, but directly affected by violent Islamic militias and terrorists.

How to combine the two rankings? Pew produces a mixed rating that incorporates the worst of both:

Taken together, in 2018, 40% of the world's countries (80 countries overall) had 'high' or 'very high' levels of overall restrictions on religion—reflecting either government actions or hostile acts by private individuals, organizations or social groups—down slightly from 42% (83 countries) in 2017. This remains close to the 11-year peak that was reached in 2012, when 43% (85 countries) had high or very high levels of overall restrictions. By this combined measure, as of 2018, all 20 countries in the Middle East-North Africa region have high overall restrictions on religion, as do more than half of Asia-Pacific countries (27 countries, or 54% of the region) and more than a third of countries in Europe (17 countries, 38%).

These are scary numbers. Imagine being a religious believer in a nation with both intense social hostility and pervasive government restrictions on your faith.

Christians are the most persecuted religion, facing harassment in 145 countries. Islam comes in second at 139. What is noteworthy, however, is that Islam is both perpetrator and victim, with Sunnis and Shiites routinely targeting each other along with Christians and members of other minority faiths. Judaism trails at 88 countries; the lower number reflects the dearth of Jewish believers in many nations as well as the fact that Judaism is not an evangelizing faith like Christianity and Islam. Nevertheless Pew noted that Jews “continue to be harassed in the third highest number of countries, despite the group's relatively small population size.”

Other religions also suffer from state repression and private pressure. Moreover, not having a formal faith is cause for mistreatment in 18 countries. Explained Pew:

Religiously unaffiliated people (including atheists, agnostics and people who don't identify with any religion) were harassed for religious reasons in 18 countries in 2018, down from 23 the previous year—the biggest decrease of any group. Still, in Egypt, an atheist blogger was arrested and detained for four days after being charged with insulting Islam and Shariah and disrupting communal peace with a series of YouTube videos.

Although religious liberty is never likely to be central to American foreign policy, it joins with political and civil liberties as worthy of U.S. government support. Washington should both do better at home and unapologetically back the same freedoms abroad.

There also are practical reasons to be concerned about the status of religious believers in other societies. Religious liberty truly is the first freedom. If a government is unwilling to respect freedom of conscience in addressing the transcendent, it isn't likely to respect political dissent and civil liberties. Moreover, societies with intense hostility toward other religious faiths are more likely incubators of virulent intolerance, hatred of the other, and support for terrorism. Like the canary in the mine, assaults on religious liberty provide an early warning to dangerous ideological and theological currents which could explode outward in violence.

Underlying religious hostility also creates an incendiary environment for American government intervention. Washington's perceived war on Islam—constantly bombing, invading, and/or occupying Muslim states, backing Muslim governments which oppress their own people, and supporting other governments which war against and occupy Muslim populations—creates a political hothouse in which terrorism thrives. That is an important (though by no means the only) reason for the U.S. to draw back from endless war in the Middle East and Central Asia.

President Donald Trump sought to advance religious liberty, mostly to cement the loyalty of his evangelical supporters. Democrats also would benefit at the polls by again making religious liberty a bipartisan issue.

More important, though, soon-to-be President Biden should support freedom for the faithful on principle—it is a basic human right that deserves U.S. support. Especially since doing so helps promote greater human understanding and diffuse social conflict, which often flares into violence and terrorism. Upholding religious liberty should top the agenda of every president.

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