

# Targeting The World's Worst Religious Persecutors

**Doug Bandow** -Jun. 13 2011 -

The most important test of a government's legitimacy is whether it protects basic human rights, most obviously life and liberty. The foundation is freedom conscience, including religious liberty. Governments unwilling to respect their citizen's faith in God and view of the transcendent are not likely to treat people with dignity in other ways.

The imperfections of the American political system are obvious. Many foreign governments are far worse, leaving Washington policymakers permanently tempted to try to fix other states. Alas, the U.S. rarely can do much to transform authoritarian regimes. Even war offers little hope of creating free and just societies, at least at reasonable cost. Iraq demonstrates the price of supposedly humanitarian military intervention, especially to the people supposedly being liberated. And it is still far from clear how much freedom Iraqis will ultimately enjoy.

Nevertheless, the American president possesses a great bully pulpit and can name and shame foreign malefactors. Equally important are private people and organizations in highlighting abuses and aiding victims. Often individual people and families can be saved even in the midst of brutal persecution.

Unfortunately, the picture of religious liberty around the world is not pretty. While there have been instances of progress over the last year, most of the news is bad. In its latest annual assessment the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom finds "severe violations of religious freedom and related human rights over the past year." Common is official state persecution as well as pervasive social discrimination and violence unconstrained by and sometimes aided by government.

Brutalizing religious minorities often further destabilizes already fragile systems, with sometimes important foreign policy implications. Observes the USCIRF: "many of the countries where there are serious challenges to freedom of religion or belief are strategically vital to their neighbors, our own nation, and the world."

Although there is great variety among persecuting states, two characteristics stand out: Islamic national or regional majorities and Communist or former Communist ideologies. Of the 25 nations singled out as the worst abusers by the Commission, 11 are majority Muslim and 10 are Communist/former Communist.

The Commission recommended that 14 countries be designated as a Country of Particular Concern, which requires the State Department to act—by, for instance, imposing sanctions—or formally waive the penalty. CPC, explains the USCIRF, is used for "governments that have engaged in or tolerated 'particularly severe' violations of religious freedom." Despite previous Commission recommendations, the State

Department currently only invokes the label in eight cases, and in two of those has issued waivers. Politics still reigns supreme.

Burma is the only majority Buddhist nation on the list, though Sri Lanka is a lesser Buddhist offender. The so-called State Peace and Development Council, nominally replaced by a new civilian government, is not so much pro-Buddhist as anti-any person of faith who challenges the junta. Burma, explains the Commission, “remains one of the world’s worst human rights violators.” At particular risk are largely Christian ethnic groups, such as the Karen, which long have been fighting for autonomy. Such minorities suffer from the military’s systematic brutality, which includes conscripting civilians as porters and destroying homes and villages, as well as widespread rape and murder. However, the regime also has targeted Buddhist monks for supporting peaceful democracy protests in 2007.

Potential superpower China is growing economically but appears to be regressing in terms of human rights. In some regions there is more space for religious faith, but the authorities continue to target the genuine (as opposed to “patriotic”) Catholic Church and evangelical house churches. Moreover, notes the USCIRF: “Religious freedom conditions for Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims remain particularly acute as the government broadened its efforts to discredit and imprison religious leaders.”

Eritrea’s population is closely divided between Muslims and Christians. The government resembles that of Burma, focused on maintaining absolute power at all costs. Thus, reports the Commission, “systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations continue,” including arbitrary arrest, torture, and death. The regime also interferes with worship activities, especially of groups which lack official recognition.

Theocratic Iran is noted for the ruthlessness with which Muslim clerics and their allies hold onto power. Over the last year, says the USCIRF, “religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate, especially for religious minorities such as Baha’is, Christians and Sufi Muslims.” Members of disfavored faiths face “prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religious of the accused.”

North Korea may be the worst government on earth, a continuing example of the poverty and brutality of Communism. With its rulers (the so-called Great and Dear Leaders) accorded near-divine status, the regime unsurprisingly attempts to suppress religious belief. The government engages in “discrimination and harassment of both authorized and unauthorized religious activity; the arrest, torture, and possible execution of those conducting clandestine religious activity;” and much more.

American ally Saudi Arabia may be as totalitarian as North Korea, though with Islam replacing Communism. Notes the Commission, the House of Saud bans “all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government’s own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam.” Other believers are not even safe worshipping in their homes, and “Almost 10 years since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States, the Saudi government has failed to implement a number of promised reforms related to

religious practice and tolerance.” Indeed, Riyadh is actively promoting extremist and intolerant views in madrassas and mosques around the world.

Sudan suffered through one of the longest internal conflicts, which for years placed the Islamic national government against Christians and animists who sought regional autonomy. Although that conflict was seemingly settled with the creation of a separate southern state, boundary skirmishes have begun. Moreover, the USCIRF warns that Khartoum government continues to impose sharia law, criminalize conversion away from Islam, and deny “the rights of non-Muslims to public religious expression and persuasion.”

Uzbekistan is one of the many pieces of the former Soviet Union and an equal opportunity oppressor. Notes the Commission: “The Uzbek government violates the full range of human rights and harshly penalizes individuals for independent religious activity, regardless of their religious affiliation.” Muslims, too, suffer from persecution.

The “Arab spring” came to Egypt, but a winter gale hit Coptic Christians. Discrimination and violence have been problems for years. However, notes the Commission: “The Egyptian government has failed to protect religious minorities, particularly Coptic Christians, from violent attacks, including during the transitional period when minority communities are increasingly vulnerable.” The situation may further deteriorate as the nation moves through an uncertain political transition.

Iraq is freer without Saddam Hussein as dictator, but that also means Islamic extremists are much freer to attack religious minorities. Notes the USCIRF: “members of the country’s smallest religious minorities suffer from targeted violence, threats, and intimidation, against which the government does not provide effective protection.” Perhaps half of the original Christian community has fled the country. Few of these “Assyrian” Christians, whose ancestors predate the arrival of Islam, are likely to return.

Nigeria is another divided country. The northern Muslim majority provinces exploded into violence after the recent election of the Christian president, who took over when his Muslim predecessor died. Unfortunately, notes the Commission, “Years of inaction by Nigeria’s federal and state governments have created a climate of impunity, resulting in thousands of deaths.” The panel cites other concerns, including the expansion of sharia into criminal law and “discrimination against minority communities of Christians and Muslims.”

Pakistan is not yet a Muslim theocracy, but the public space for Christians and other religious minorities is closing rapidly. This state, says the USCIRF, “continues to be responsible for systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief.” A federal minister (Christian) and state governor (Muslim) were murdered earlier this year for opposing the blasphemy laws, which are routinely abused to victimize Christians and others. Indeed, the Commission warns, “Sectarian and religiously-

motivated violence is chronic,” with perpetrators rarely punished for their crimes. Pakistan increasingly looks like an unstable bomb with a shrinking fuse.

Turkmenistan is another Central Asian state which won its independence when the U.S.S.R. broke up. Despite some relaxation of controls after the death of the long-time dictator in 2007, notes the panel, “Police raids and other harassment of registered and unregistered religious groups continue.”

Vietnam remains avowedly Communist in politics despite Hanoi’s discovery of the market. Although shamed by its official designation as a CPC, the regime, explains the USCIRF, “continues to control religious communities, severely restrict and penalize independent religious practice, and brutally repress individuals and groups viewed as challenging its authority.” Activity by non-approved organizations is prohibited and the government mimics Islamic states in strongly discouraging conversion.

Unfortunately, these countries are not alone. The USCIRF placed another 11 nations on its Watch List, which is for “countries where the serious violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by the governments do not meet the CPC threshold but require close monitoring.”

These discreditable states are: Afghanistan, Belarus, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Laos, Russia, Somalia, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Venezuela. Afghanistan, Indonesia, Somalia, and Turkey are Muslim. Belarus, Cuba, Laos, Russia, and Tajikistan are Communist/former Communist, with Venezuela a fellow traveler moving in a more authoritarian direction. India is the standout as a majority Hindu nation with frequent attacks on Muslims as well as Christians.

Many other nations actively persecute or tolerate private intimidation and violence, just not as egregiously. Even in Canada and Europe both left-wing political correctness and fear of retaliation by Islamic extremists have begun to limit the freedom of Christians to proselytize and preach. France has banned women from wearing the burqa.

The freedom to believe, or not believe, in God and respond accordingly—as individuals, families, and communities—is precious. Sadly, much of humankind is denied this most fundamental right.

While Washington cannot make the world free, Americans can reach out and help their oppressed brothers and sisters around the globe. Persecution should be highlighted and denounced; victims of intolerance, hate, and violence should be comforted and supported. Finally, if America is to remain free, Americans must tenaciously defend religious liberty at home.