

Redeeming the Obama Administration's Record on Religious Liberty

Religious liberty is the first freedom. If governments will not protect this most basic liberty of conscience, they are unlikely to protect political or civil freedoms.

Promoting human rights long has been an important U.S. government priority. America obviously has done so only imperfectly -- witness persistent support for authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, the presidency has become an important bully pulpit to promote basic freedoms.

Only recently has Washington paid much attention to religious liberty. The State Department's evident lack of enthusiasm led Congress to pass the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), creating an Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom. The Bush administration's efforts were anemic, but at least it fielded an ambassador. Two years into the Obama administration the position remains vacant.

Only last June, nearly 15 months after he took office, did the president finally nominate someone for the position. And with no qualifications for the position or strategy to promote religious liberty, the nominee failed to win confirmation. But even had Congress acted, the administration planned on downgrading the ambassador's office and staff. Moreover, while promoting better relations with Islamic nations, the administration has said nothing of note about protecting religious minorities within those same countries.

Two months after his party was trounced at the polls, President Barack Obama has renominated Dr. Suzan Johnson Cook as ambassador. There's no way to retrieve the last two years, but the administration could use the

upcoming confirmation process to develop a serious program to promote religious liberty.

First, the administration must define religious liberty broadly. Religion requires not just the private right to believe, but the public rights to convert, practice, and evangelize. True religious freedom requires the opportunity transform one's life and community accordingly.

Second, the president and secretary of state should commit to providing Dr. Cook with both resources and access. Her office should be strengthened and its staff should operate under her authority. She should not be fobbed off on an assistant secretary, but should be included in daily briefings and policy meetings with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The National Security Council should work with Dr. Cook to ensure that other agencies also address the impact of international religious persecution on U.S. foreign policy.

Third, the administration should revive the presidency as a bully pulpit. President Obama spoke eloquently in Cairo about improving America's relationship with the Muslim world. He should speak equally passionately about the need for the Muslim world, in particular, to treat religious minorities with dignity and respect. Striking the right international balance is rarely easy, as the administration has found in Egypt. But the president should hold freedom of religion as high as freedom of speech and the right to democracy.

Fourth, the State Department should keep the ambassador clear of secular political controversies. There has been talk of involving the office in such issues as gay rights. But the administration's objective should be to lobby foreign governments to create an environment in which people can believe freely, not to lobby religious people to change their beliefs.

Fifth, Secretary Clinton should emphasize the improved religious understanding of all diplomats and analysts, from the top down. Religion is the most powerful animating force in much of the world, including in the U.S. Even where the administration is not formally pushing foreign governments to better respect religious liberty, American policymakers need to understand how religious beliefs affect American interests, from security to human rights. The ambassador could help address these concerns.

Enhancing the role of the ambassador is not only the right thing to do. It also is the politically smart thing to do. President Obama has had an uneasy relationship, at best, with many religious conservatives. A serious effort to strengthen protection for religious liberty around the world could help ease these tensions. In fact, it wouldn't be hard to improve upon the Bush administration's record, which included initiating the unnecessary and counterproductive Iraq war, which has effectively destroyed the ancient, indigenous Christian community in that Muslim land.

Dr. Cook also has important responsibilities. She evidently is bright and capable, but has no experience with international diplomacy or religious persecution. Her nomination suggested that the administration views the position as a political plum with no substantive importance.

Unfortunately, she did little to dispel these concerns last year. Apparently her administration handlers discouraged contact with activists or legislators. She never articulated a strategy for fulfilling her statutory mandate. And her responses to congressional questions failed to impress.

Dr. Cook must do better this time. One of her responsibilities is the annual State Department report on religious freedom. It is a useful informational tool which needs to be better publicized. The ambassadorship also provides a useful platform from which to energize the American people. Private action, through churches, NGOs, and other groups, is one of the most

important means available to combat religious persecution overseas. She needs to convince activists and Senators, who will vote on her nomination, that she will use these tools effectively.

Moreover, religious liberty must be integrated into the larger human rights dialogue which the U.S. conducts with many nations. U.S. diplomats also need to better understand what people in other countries believe, and how those beliefs affect economic and security concerns. In short, U.S. foreign policy needs to better account for religion around the world. That will require Dr. Cook to articulate the fundamental importance of religious liberty, explain the varieties of religious belief, cooperate with other bureaus within State, and forge a working relationship with Secretary Clinton.

Achieving these objectives will require knowledge and effort. Doubt about Dr. Cook's qualifications and the administration's seriousness led Sen. Jim DeMint (R-SC) to block her confirmation last year. Rather than attempting to bluff her way to Senate approval, Dr. Cook needs to adopt religious liberty as her cause and demonstrate her willingness to become its passionate advocate.

Last year she seemed to emphasize contacts and exchanges as means of promoting religious liberty. They undoubtedly are useful, but they will not transform the policies of the worst persecutors. Dr. Cook needs to demonstrate her ability to simultaneously articulate high ideals, stimulate global activism, and implement practical policies in the face of sometimes contradictory U.S. interests and priorities. For instance, what should Washington say about religious liberty when dealing with major security concerns in such nations as China, Afghanistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iran?

Activists and legislators are likely to remain skeptical of Dr. Cook. But they also want an ambassador in place. It will not be easy to convince them that

she is a good choice for the job. However, with commitment and effort she could easily exceed their low expectations. And if she follows confirmation with performance, she could win their confidence and perhaps even help make the world a better place.

Although the international aura surrounding President Obama's election has faded, he remains one of America's best representatives abroad. He should use his influence to encourage greater respect for religious freedom. But the time is late for him to demonstrate serious concern for this issue. He should use the confirmation campaign on behalf of Dr. Cook to demonstrate that advancing religious liberty will be a priority.

Equally important, she must prove herself to be worthy of such a campaign. In Washington terms the ambassadorship is a minor sinecure. But in human rights terms she could become one of the U.S. government's most important freedom advocates. It is up to Dr. Cook to make it so.