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## Highlighting the World's Worst Religious Persecutors

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There is little that political tyrants fear more than religion. Most faiths call people to put their trust in something transcendent, to which all worldly pursuits, including government, are subject. God, not the president, king, general secretary, czar, prime minister, caudillo, or other similarly exalted politician, is supreme.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent body established by Congress, has released its latest annual report. The Commission only covers the worst of the worst, but that is sufficient to fill 90 pages. Many of these generally oppressive regimes grow more brutal and arbitrary year after year.

A government that fails to allow people to address the transcendent as they understand it will not long allow them to make free political choices either.

USIRF recommends that 17 persecutors be labeled “Countries of Particular Concern” and sanctioned accordingly. Enforcement is up to the State Department, which sometimes equivocates for geopolitical reasons. For instance, last year Secretary of State Antony Blinken left Afghanistan, India, Nigeria, Syria, and Vietnam off the department’s list. At least the last one ended up on the less harsh Special Watch List.

Many nations are effectively permanent members CPCs — Saudi Arabia, North Korea, Iran, and China, for instance. Two states were newly added this year, Cuba and Nicaragua. As before, the State Department will decide their final disposition.

Afghanistan was an obvious CPC designee. Even when the U.S.-supported government was in power there was little religious liberty. Now the Taliban rules. Explained USCIRF: “In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate, as they have since the Taliban seized control of the country in August 2021. In contrast to its pledges for change and inclusivity upon its seizure of power, the Taliban has since ruled Afghanistan in a deeply repressive and intolerant manner — essentially unchanged from its previous era in power from 1996 to 2001.”

Also on the road to hell is Burma. The junta has responded to increasing popular resistance with greater brutality. Reported the Commission: “In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Burma continued to decline significantly. Since staging a military coup in February 2021, the country’s junta — the Tatmadaw — has ruled through the State Administration Council (SAC) under the leadership of General Min Aung Hlaing. The SAC maintains full control of only an estimated 17 percent of the country’s total territory, and in that limited space it has significantly cracked down on all dissent and freedoms.”

In China Xi Jinping is leading China back to Maoist-era repression and regimentation. USCIRF covered what has become a breathtaking level of religious persecution:

During the year, Chinese authorities continued their repressive sinicization of Islam and forced assimilation policy in Xinjiang that attempts to eradicate Uyghurs’ and other Turkic Muslims’ distinct ethnoreligious identities.... Forced labor, political indoctrination, mass surveillance, an intrusive homestay program that embeds officials in Uyghur households, and forced interfaith marriages also continued.... Government control and suppression of Tibetan Buddhism

intensified.... Across China, authorities detained or otherwise forcibly disappeared Catholic priests and bishops — including Bishop Joseph Zhang Weizhu and Bishop Augustine Cui Tai — who refused to join the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. Persecution of Protestant house church Christians also intensified in 2022. The government carried out a nationwide crackdown on house churches by harassing, detaining, physically abusing, and sentencing Protestants who refused to join the state-controlled Three-Self Patriotic Movement.... The government continued its persecution of Falun Gong and the Church of Almighty God (CAG), often using “anti-cult” provisions under Article 300 of China’s Criminal Law.

The retirement of Raoul Castro did nothing to relax persecution in Cuba. USCIRF related: “In 2022, religious freedom conditions in Cuba worsened. Throughout the year, the Cuban government tightly controlled religious activity through surveillance, harassment of religious leaders and laypeople, forced exile, fines, and ill treatment of religious prisoners of conscience. Religious leaders and groups that are unregistered or conducted unsanctioned religious activity — as well as journalistic reporting on religious freedom conditions — faced relentless oppression from the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA) and state security forces.”

Eritrea has been called the North Korea of Africa, and that is not a compliment. Freedom House ranks both at just three points out of a hundred, putting them in the nether regions of its rankings for civil and political liberty. Also dismal is the status of religious freedom, as detailed by the Commission. Last year “religious freedom conditions in Eritrea remained extremely poor. The government did not register any new religious organizations, and individuals practicing faiths other than the four officially recognized by the government faced intimidation and prosecution by Eritrean authorities. Members of officially recognized religions also faced restrictions and government backlash for practicing their faith. Dozens of religious prisoners of conscience remain imprisoned in decrepit, unsanitary, and inhumane conditions.”

Although majority Muslim states are among the worst persecutors, in India Muslims are the most persecuted, given their large number. The far smaller Christian population also faces often severe mistreatment, much of it unofficial but encouraged by state authorities. Reported USCIRF: “In 2022, religious freedom conditions in India continued to worsen. Throughout the year, the Indian government at the national, state, and local levels promoted and enforced religiously discriminatory policies, including laws targeting religious conversion, interfaith relationships, the wearing of hijabs, and cow slaughter, which negatively impact Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, and Adivasis (indigenous peoples and scheduled tribes). The national government also continued to suppress critical voices — particularly religious minorities and those advocating on their behalf — including through surveillance, harassment, demolition of property, and detention.” Alas, Washington consistently downplays New Delhi’s malign role for political reasons, since the U.S. wants India to be a counterweight to China.

Iran has long been a notable persecutor. Last year, explained the Commission, “religious freedom conditions in Iran sharply deteriorated. Following the death of Mahsa Zhina Amini after her arrest and torture by police for wearing an ‘improper hijab,’ Iran repressed nationwide protests with lethal force, detained and killed children, sexually assaulted and raped detained protesters, and engaged in other gross violations of human rights, including executions of protesters without due process. Scores of protesters received charges grounded in Islamic religious concepts that in Iran carry the death penalty, raising serious concerns of mass executions.”

The Western Hemisphere has traditionally enjoyed greater religious liberty than in any other region. However, in Nicaragua President Daniel Ortega — once a thug, always a thug — has become a full-fledged authoritarian, steadily increasing repression. According to USCIRF, Managua has “escalated its campaign of harassment and severe persecution against the Catholic Church by targeting clergy, eliminating Church-affiliated organizations, and placing restrictions

on religious observances. Violations of religious freedom that occurred in previous years — such as hate speech against the Catholic Church and denial of entry into the country for clergy — continued in 2022 as well.”

In Nigeria, Africa’s most populous nation, blasphemy is a common tool for religious persecution. The country, noted the Commission, suffered from “militant Islamist violence; some forms of identity-based violence; mob violence; and criminal, political, and vigilante violence impacting worship.” In this highly fractious society, “armed actors targeted worshipers and religious leaders. Attacks targeted churches and mosques in Kaduna State, mosques in Zamfara and Katsina states, and several Christian leaders in other parts of the country. Tensions at the intersection of ethnicity, religion, and geographic heritage yielded atrocities in several regions, including in Plateau, Benue, and Anambra states.”

The nation that comes closest to treating politics as religion may be North Korea, which demands absolute loyalty to the leader, now the third generation of the Kim family. According to USCIRF: “Religious practitioners belong to the ‘hostile’ class and are considered enemies of the state, deserving ‘discrimination, punishment, isolation, and even execution.’ The government attempts to provide an illusion of religious freedom to the outside world.... In reality, religious freedom remains nonexistent as authorities actively and systematically target and persecute religious groups and adherents, including Christians, practitioners of shamanism, and others.” Punishment is severe: “Authorities consider the practice of their faith a political crime and levy particularly harsh punishments on prisoners from that community, including severe torture and killing.”

In Pakistan the fount of persecution is Islam, not communism. The Commission explained: “In 2022, Pakistan’s religious freedom conditions continued to deteriorate. Religious minorities were subject to frequent attacks and threats, including accusations of blasphemy, targeted killings, lynchings, mob violence, forced conversions, sexual violence against women and girls, and

desecration of houses of worship and cemeteries. Members of the Shi'a Muslim, Ahmadiyya Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Sikh communities faced the continued threat of persecution via harsh and discriminatory legislation, such as anti-Ahmadiyya and blasphemy laws, as well as increasingly aggressive societal discrimination amid a rise in radical Islamist influence. These laws have enabled and encouraged radical Islamists to operate with impunity, openly targeting religious minorities or those with differing beliefs, including nonbelievers.”

Human rights also have continued to decline in Russia, and religious liberty is no exception, especially in areas seized from Ukraine. Reported USCIRF: “Authorities increasingly prosecuted members of religious minority communities using a range of legal mechanisms, including a 1996 religion law; laws on terrorism, extremism, and ‘undesirable organizations’; provisions criminalizing blasphemy; and others. These vague laws continued to give authorities broad powers to outlaw religious groups, prosecute individuals based on their religious speech or religious activities, and ban religious literature deemed ‘extremist.’ The government also continued to fine Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Old Believers, and others for illegal missionary activities and other violations of various restrictions.”

In political and religious affairs, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia remains a veritable totalitarian state, ranked behind Iran, China, and Russia. Non-Muslims enjoy no religious freedom.

According to the Commission: “The Saudi government continued to systematically deny non-Muslims the ability to build houses of worship or worship in public. According to the 1992 Saudi Basic Law of Governance, the constitution is the Qur’an and the sunna (traditions of the Prophet). The judicial system is largely governed by a Saudi interpretation of Shari’a as informed by Hanbali jurisprudence. Apostasy (including conversion away from Islam) and blasphemy are both crimes carrying the potential for a death sentence, though blasphemy is more often punished through prison sentences, fines, and lashings, and no executions on either charge have taken place in recent years.”

In Syria no religious minority is safe, with the worst persecution occurring in areas outside of government control. Turkey's role is particularly malign. The Commission related that "Nonstate actors, such as Turkish-supported armed opposition groups (TSOs) in the north-central region and former al-Qaeda affiliate and U.S.-designated terrorist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib in the northwest, perpetrated many violations against religious minorities. Emboldened by Turkey's support and intensifying military action in northern Syria, TSOs continued to target religious minorities, especially Yazidis, for rape, assassination, kidnapping for ransom, confiscation of property, and desecration of cemeteries and places of worship."

Tajikistan is a Muslim majority state in which tyranny comes first. Reported USCIRF: "The Tajik government continued to severely repress the country's Muslim majority. Children under the age of 18 are barred from visiting mosques and all other public religious activities except for funerals. Private religious education is banned, and children are only allowed to receive religious instruction from their parents at home. Since 2014, the government has appointed all imams, required them to wear state-issued religious garments, and strictly dictated their sermons. People under the age of 35 are not allowed to perform the Hajj."

Even worse is Turkmenistan, which, amazingly, is rated as more repressive than both North Korea and Eritrea. According to the Commission: "The government controls all aspects of religious life and expression, dictating and surveilling religious practice and punishing nonconformity through administrative harassment, imprisonment, and torture." However, the true degree of repression is difficult to assess since "the country is largely closed off from the rest of the world, making it difficult for accurate information to flow into or out of its borders. The government's tight hold on society and information also makes it difficult to document the full scope of the ongoing religious freedom violations."

Completing the list of the Dirty Dozen Plus Five is Vietnam. It is another political embarrassment for Washington, since Hanoi is seen as another potential bulwark against China.

Yet, explained USCIRF: “Authorities intensified their control and persecution of religious groups — especially unregistered, independent communities, including Montagnard and Hmong Protestants, Cao Dai followers, Hoa Hao Buddhists, and Unified Buddhists, as well as other unrecognized movements such as Duong Van Minh and Falun Gong. Even members of state-controlled religious groups experienced persecution.... The 2018 Law on Belief and Religion (LBR) remained restrictive, and groups encountered challenges with registration due to the law’s uneven and inconsistent application throughout the country, contravening international standards.” All faiths suffer at Hanoi’s unclean hands.

The Commission also designated eleven states as members of the Special Watch List: Algeria, Azerbaijan, Central African Republic, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. Although persecution in SWL countries is not as complete as in CPCs, it is still rated “severe.” People may be mistreated, imprisoned, and even murdered for their faith.

Christ warned that we would have the poor ever with us. So, too, it appears, the persecuted. Believers obviously should stand up for each other. They also should defend the right of conscience for those who hold different faiths or no faith at all.

Religious liberty benefits the irreligious as well. The belief in human dignity rooted in God’s creation is the strongest foundation for the liberal society in its best sense. Moreover, protection for faith is equivalent to the famed canary in the mine: A government that fails to allow people to address the transcendent as they understand it will not long allow them to make free political choices either.

This explains the desperate efforts of dictators of all sorts to suppress religious belief. Their fears should reinforce our determination to preserve the freedom to live a life of faith in even the most secular of societies.



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