

Religious Persecution Around the Globe: A Guide

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Religious liberty is the foundation of freedom of conscience. Belief about the transcendent underlies support for any political, social, or economic order. Regimes which bar people from responding to a profound and powerful spiritual call will interfere with any and all individual desires. That is why totalitarian systems, which claim the whole person, are so intent on destroying or coopting religion.

Unfortunately, in recent years the news on freedom not only to believe but live out those beliefs has been almost uniformly bad. The Muslim world is awash in not just repression but enslavement and slaughter of minority faiths. Authoritarian secular systems employ special brutality against those who seek to hold politicians to a higher standard.

Last year was no different. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has issued its [latest report](#), which is filled with bad news. However, there is a proverbial silver lining, or at least a bit of good news amid the bad.

The most dramatic developments occurred in Sudan, pictures from which adorn the report's cover. In 1989 Gen. Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir overthrew a democratically elected government that was negotiating with rebels in what is now independent, but war-torn, South Sudan. He imposed a repressive Islamic theocracy of the sort common in the Middle East and initiated years of war against dissident movements and peoples.

After three decades of misrule, noted the USCIRF:

A brave, grassroots protest movement brought down the Islamist-led regime of former president Omar al-Bashir in April, followed by the establishment of a joint civilian-military transitional government four months later. The transitional constitution no longer identifies Islam as the primary source of law, and it includes a provision ensuring the freedom of belief and worship. In November, the transitional government, which has engaged closely with USCIRF on religious freedom concerns, repealed the repressive public order laws that the former regime used to punish individuals, particularly women, who did not conform to its interpretation of Sunni Islam."

There is more to do, of course, and the revolution could yet go awry, given the continuing malign influence of the military. Nevertheless, for the first time in years Christians and other religious minorities, including secular-minded Muslims, can live their spiritual lives more freely.

The other dramatic improvement came in Uzbekistan. Although it remains a repressive state, like most of its Central Asian neighbors, a political transition in 2016 led to significant reforms. One of them was to relax religious controls. Reported the Commission, under the government of Shavkat Mirziyoyev "Uzbekistan took significant steps in 2019 to fulfill its commitments of the

last few years to improve religious freedom conditions, also in close consultation with USCIRF.” Again, the job of freeing religious believers is not finished. However, Uzbekistan has proved that positive change is possible.

Unfortunately, bad news is abundant. Perhaps the Commission’s most striking judgment is to recommend that the State Department declare India to be a Country of Particular Concern. Narendra Modi’s record in heading the state of Gujarat was one of extraordinary religious intolerance, inflaming anti-Muslim sentiments which led to riots that killed hundreds and perhaps thousands of Muslims. Since being elected prime minister six years ago his government has embraced and inflamed Hindu nationalism.

Reported USCIRF:

India took a sharp downward turn in 2019. The national government used its strengthened parliamentary majority to institute national-level policies violating religious freedom across India, especially for Muslims. Most notably, it enacted the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, which provides a fast track to Indian citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan already residing in India. ... The national and various state governments also allowed nationwide campaigns of harassment and violence against religious minorities to continue with impunity, and engaged in and tolerated hate speech and incitement to violence against them.

However, India is but one bad actor. There are many, a number of which are highlighted by the Commission. Including India, 14 nations made the Countries of Particular Concern list.

Burma. There are few more tragic cases than Burma, officially renamed Myanmar by the military junta that ruled for more than a half century — and which now dominates behind the official government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Reported USCIRF:

In 2019, the Burmese government continued to commit widespread and egregious religious freedom violations, particularly against Rohingya Muslims. Ethnic-driven conflict and degradation of other civil rights often coincide with religious differences, thereby severely restricting freedom of religion or belief.

For decades a succession of uniformed tyrants conducted brutal campaigns against insurgents seeking autonomy for various ethnic groups, including largely Christian groups, such as the Karen. More recently the military, or Tatmadaw, conducted a near genocidal campaign against the largely Muslim Rohingya, driving much of the population, more than a million people, from their homes and most out of Burma. Suu Kyi, a Nobel Laureate once lionized for her campaign for democracy that left her under house arrest for years, defended the military’s behavior. She may not control the generals, but she unaccountably gave them cover for their crimes.

Other groups also suffer. Fighting has resumed in some ethnic areas. Moreover, observed the Commission: “Non-Buddhist religious communities routinely faced difficulties in getting permission to construct or repair houses of worship and continued to face harassment from local authorities and nonstate actors.”

China. Richard Nixon’s opening to the People’s Republic of China did not result in a free, democratic China. But after Mao Zedong’s long overdue death, the country changed dramatically, with an explosion of personal autonomy though not political freedom. Religious

liberty was one aspect of that changing society, yielding more Christians than Chinese Communist Party members. In 2014 I was in traffic in Beijing and spotted a Christian “fish” on a car bumper. Religious observance was disfavored, but often tolerated so long as believers didn’t attack the CCP.

That is no longer the case. General Secretary/President Xi Jinping is reconstructing the totalitarian dictatorship of Mao, the “Great Helmsman.” Repression has risen across the board, but especially against religious believers. Although Xi talks of China’s greatness, he is scared of people who believe that all rulers, including him, are accountable to someone and something greater.

The Commission report’s account of the PRC’s crimes is chilling:

- “The Chinese government has created a high-tech surveillance state, utilizing facial recognition and artificial intelligence to monitor religious minorities.”
- “[B]etween 900,000 and 1.8 million Uighur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and other Muslims have been detained in more than 1,300 concentration camps in Xinjiang — an estimate revised upward since the previous reporting period.... Former detainees report that they suffered torture, rape, sterilization, and other abuses.”
- “The Chinese government continued to pursue a strategy of forced assimilation and suppression of Tibetan Buddhism, as demonstrated by the laws designed to control the next reincarnation of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and those of other Tibetan eminent lamas. Monks and nuns who refused to denounce the Dalai Lama have been expelled from their monasteries, imprisoned, and tortured.”
- “Chinese authorities raided or closed down hundreds of Protestant house churches in 2019.... Local authorities continued to harass and detain bishops, including Guo Xijin and Cui Tai, who refused to join the state-affiliated Catholic association. Several local governments, including Guangzhou city, offered cash bounties for individuals who informed on underground churches. In addition, authorities across the country have removed crosses from churches, banned youth under the age of 18 from participating in religious services, and replaced images of Jesus Christ or the Virgin Mary with pictures of President Xi Jinping.”
- “[T]housands of Falun Gong practitioners were arrested during 2019 for practicing the movement’s meditation exercises or distributing literature about their beliefs. Human rights advocates and scientists presented evidence that the practice of harvesting organs from prisoners — many of whom are believed to be Falun Gong practitioners — continued on a significant scale.”

There is no defense for such an appalling record.

Eritrea. This isolated, totalitarian North African state has been called the North Korea of Africa. Last year there were brief signs of hope for political liberalization, but little of substance changed. And the secular state remains as brutally repressive as ever. Many Eritreans flee; I have served as an expert in two asylum cases of Pentecostals who escaped the Eritrean prison state.

Reported the Commission:

In 2019, religious freedom conditions in Eritrea worsened, with increasing interference in and restrictions on religious groups. ... Eritrea continues to have one of the worst religious freedom records in the world, and has shown little interest in concretely improving the situation. No new religious institutions were officially registered, and thus only four religious communities remain legally permitted to operate: the Coptic Orthodox Church of Eritrea, Sunni Islam, the Roman Catholic Church, and the Evangelical Church of Eritrea, a Lutheran-affiliated denomination.

Even groups nominally allowed to operate have little freedom. Noted USCIRF:

The government responded harshly to both registered religious groups as well as unrecognized ones, such as the Pentecostal and Evangelical Christian communities, and accused religious actors of political interference for defending their beliefs and human rights. Christians were arbitrarily arrested and detained, including in waves of arrests.

India. As noted earlier, the commissioners called out India. It long has belied its democratic status with non-state violence and state-level discrimination against religious minorities, usually Muslims or Christians. Unfortunately, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi the persecution has gone national. Last year, in a desperate attempt to win votes, the opposition Congress Party also catered to Hindu nationalist sentiments. And the Trump administration has turned a blind eye to the brutality even against Christians, whose electoral support he desires in the U.S. Perhaps because the bulk of India's victims are Muslim, the CPC designation garnered a political dissent normally more characteristic of the State Department from some commissioners.

Iran. The administration has criticized Tehran for its sustained assault on religious freedom because doing so bolsters Washington's overall political and economic war against Iran. Religious minorities are publicly present — unlike in, for instance, Saudi Arabia — but suffer rigorous repression. Alas, little changed last year. Explained the Commission: “religious freedom conditions in Iran remained egregiously poor. As in years past, the government responded to calls for reform by systematically cracking down on religious minorities.”

No one is safe from persecution. USCIRF noted “a particular uptick in the persecution of Baha'is and local government officials who supported them in 2019.” Unsurprisingly, Christians, especially those who converted from Islam, “also were persecuted and imprisoned for practicing their faith.” Among those imprisoned have been dual American-Iranian citizens.

President Hassan Rouhani once promised to improve treatment of religious minorities. That was then, this is now. Jews and Sufis routinely suffer. The Islamic Republic's brutal religious laws even victimize secular Iranians. Reported the Commission: supposedly moderate “Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif claimed Iran's execution of members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) community was necessary according to ‘moral principles.’”

Nigeria. Perhaps Africa's most important nation, possessing the largest economy and population as well as large oil reserves, Nigeria is divided almost equally by religion. However, the violence flows almost entirely one way.

The greatest problem has been caused by the radical Islamic group Boko Haram. It “targeted military posts and convoys, houses, farmlands, and mosques; abducted civilians; and killed hostages, including numerous humanitarian aid workers. Since 2009, Boko Haram has displaced more than two million people and killed tens of thousands,” reported the Commission. Muslim Fulani groups also routinely committed murder and mayhem, targeting Christians especially.

Moreover, “The federal government continued to detain the leader of a Shia minority group, the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN), and violently cracked down on its members during religious processions and protests.”

Nigeria is a functioning democracy, but sectarianism undermines the political process. Governments have been hampered by incompetence and corruption. The system’s greatest failure is its inability to protect its people of all faiths. Explained USCIRF: “There were multiple reports of criminal attacks on religious and traditional leaders and houses of worship. In the surge of hundreds of kidnappings in 2019, media reported numerous incidents of kidnappings for ransom and the killing of Protestant and Catholic priests.”

North Korea. There is one country that, though small and poor, routinely wins the world’s attention. The latest guessing game was whether Kim Jong-un, the North’s Supreme Leader, was alive, incapacitated, or dead. Pyongyang has nuclear weapons and is developing long-range missiles capable of hitting America.

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea also is one of the most repressive if not the most repressive nation on earth. Having elevated its rulers, of whom this Kim is the third generation, to near godly status, the regime is especially brutal to religious believers who view politics as secondary and politicians as subject to divine judgment. Unfortunately, the regime’s isolation — China and Russia are its northern neighbors — makes it difficult for the outside world to discover reality within the DPRK.

Reported the Commission:

The government treats religion as a threat to the state-propagated ideology known as Juche, which preaches “self-reliance and self-development.” Christians are especially vulnerable because the government views them as susceptible to foreign influence. Any expression of religion outside the limited number of state-sponsored houses of worship happens in secret. Anyone caught practicing religion or even suspected of harboring religious views in private is subject to severe punishment, including arrest, torture, imprisonment, and execution. The possession and distribution of religious texts remains a criminal offense under North Korean law.

Christians are believed to make up a sizeable proportion of the North’s large labor camp population.

Pakistan. Sadly, several nominal American allies are among the worst religious persecutors. So it is with Islamabad. Although the government discriminates against religious minorities, violence is usually inflicted privately, with little effective response from the state.

Unfortunately, noted USCIRF, last year:

[R]eligious freedom conditions across Pakistan continued to trend negatively. The systematic enforcement of blasphemy and anti-Ahmadiyya laws, and authorities’ failure to address forced conversions of religious minorities — including Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs — to Islam, severely restricted freedom of religion or belief.

At extraordinary risk are non-Muslim women. Explained the Commission:

In Hindu, Christian, and Sikh communities, young women, often underage, continued to be kidnapped for forced conversion to Islam. Several independent institutions estimated that 1,000 women are forcibly converted to Islam each year; many are kidnapped, forcibly married, and subjected to rape. Local police, particularly in Punjab and Sindh, are often accused of complicity in these cases.

Russia. President Vladimir Putin has sought to coopt the Orthodox Church for political purposes. However, the Russian Federation is not a welcome place for religious minorities.

Last year the situation worsened. USCIRF reported that

The government continued to target “nontraditional” religious minorities with fines, detentions, and criminal charges under the pretext of combating extremism. Russian legislation criminalizes “extremism” without adequately defining the term, enabling the state to prosecute a vast range of nonviolent religious activity. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, whom the government banned outright as “extremist” in 2017, faced intensified persecution.

The problems reach further. For instance, in “the North Caucasus, security forces acted with impunity, arresting and kidnapping persons suspected of even tangential links to Islamist militancy, and harassing Muslims at prayer services.” In Crimea, seized from Ukraine in 2014, “the occupation authorities continued to enforce Russia’s repressive laws and policies on religion, which has resulted in the prosecution of peaceful religious activity and bans on groups that were legal in Crimea under Ukrainian law.” Finally, “Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine pursue an exclusionary religious policy that privileges the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church.”

Russia is the one majority-Christian country with the worst ranking.

Saudi Arabia. The Trump administration has essentially subcontracted Mideast policy to Riyadh, turning the U.S. military into bodyguards for the Saudi royals. That is bad policy. It also is an insult to Americans, given the regime’s brutal political and religious repression.

Observed the Commission:

[Riyadh] continued to engage in other systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. The government prohibits public practice of any religion other than Islam, and no houses of worship other than mosques are allowed in the kingdom. Non-Muslims who gather in private houses are subject to surveillance and Saudi security services may break up their private worship services.

It is not just Christians who suffer:

Shia Muslims in Saudi Arabia continue to face discrimination in education, employment, and the judiciary, and lack access to senior government and military positions. The building of Shia mosques is restricted outside majority-Shia Muslim areas in the Eastern Province, and Saudi authorities often prohibit use of the Shia Muslim call to prayer in these areas. Authorities arrest and imprison Shia Muslims for holding religious gatherings in private homes without permits and reading religious materials in husseiniyas (prayer halls).

Despite its professed commitment to battle religious extremism, the regime continues to promote Wahhabism around the globe. This fundamentalist variant of Sunni Islam demonizes the other,

tacitly justifying violence against Christians, Jews, Shia, and members of other religions. Shamefully, the State Department routinely waives sanctions on a regime that is murderous and totalitarian.

Syria. Few nations have suffered like Syria, enduring nine years of bitter civil war. Reported USCIRF: “religious freedom in Syria remained under serious threat, particularly amid the country’s ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis.”

A secular dictatorship, Syria became a haven of sorts for Christians fleeing persecution elsewhere, most notably in Iraq. Many religious minorities backed President Bashar al-Assad to prevent a repeat of Iraq. Despite the Damascus government’s poor human rights record, the Commission acknowledged that “there was less evidence in 2019 of explicit religious freedom violations in areas under regime control.”

In contrast, “While it still actively controlled territory, ISIS’ genocidal ideology and actions represented the single greatest threat to religious freedom for the country’s myriad of religious minorities as well as the Sunni Muslim majority.” Moreover, “reports emerged that the U.S.-designated terrorist group Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which operates in Idlib province, persisted in religious repression, including the assault and stoning of an Armenian woman in July.” Nevertheless, the Trump administration opposed the Syrian government’s attempt to retake territory from HTS and other radical groups which predominate there.

Tajikistan. A number of governments appear to hate religion primarily because it is another activity outside of state control. Tyrants fear any independent thought. Thus, all faiths suffer similarly. So it is in Central Asia.

Unfortunately, detailed USCIRF:

[I]n 2019 the Tajikistani government’s already dismal record on religious freedom deteriorated. The regime of President Emomali Rahmon maintained its repressive policies, suppressing displays of public religiosity by individuals of all faiths and persecuting minority communities — especially actual and alleged Salafists, a term that is broadly applied. Authorities pursued a crackdown on various attributes of faith, including restrictions on wedding and funerary banquets, and pursued extralegal bans on beards and hijabs.

Reinforced by government, but nevertheless a separate problem, “Social tolerance for religious minority communities continued to decline. Members of less traditional faiths in Tajikistan, like Seventh-Day Adventists and Presbyterians, as well members of communities with ancient ties to the region, like Zoroastrians and Shi’a Muslims, all report a rise in pressure and hostility from family and community.”

Turkmenistan. Tragically, there are worse Central Asian dictatorships. As with North Korea, knowledge of what is going on inside Turkmenistan is extremely limited, but what is known is bad.

Detailed the Commission:

[R]eligious freedom conditions in Turkmenistan remained among the worst in the world and showed no signs of improvement. Turkmenistan is an extremely closed society, described as an informational ‘black hole’ with an abysmal record on freedom of the press. This landscape

makes it difficult to chronicle the actual extent of religious freedom abuses in the country, which are certainly more extensive than the limited number of reports indicate.

We do know that punishment is harsh: “Many religious prisoners are believed to be held at the notorious Ovadan-Depe Prison, located in the remote desert 50 miles north of the capital city of Ashgabat.” Conscientious objectors receive among the harshest treatment.

Vietnam. Religious repression is not as bad as in times past but remains burdensome. The government enforces, and abuses, an onerous religious registration law, while harassing unregistered churches and organizations.

Moreover, reported USCIRF:

Ethnic minority communities faced especially egregious persecution for the peaceful practice of their religious beliefs, including physical assault, detention, or banishment. An estimated 10,000 Hmong and Montagnard Christians in the Central Highlands remain effectively stateless because local authorities have refused to issue identity cards, in many instances in retaliation against Christians who refuse to renounce their faith.

In addition, “the Vietnamese government continued to arrest and imprison peaceful religious leaders and religious freedom advocates.” It is not just the national capital which threatens religious liberty, however. “Local authorities continued to expropriate or destroy property belonging to religious communities. For example, in January, authorities in Kontum Province demolished Son Linh Tu Pagoda, which had been affiliated with the independent Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam.”

These 14 states are merely the worst of the worst. Unfortunately, they have a lot of competition. And assessments aren't always easy to make. Violations of religious liberty occur on a spectrum. Not all countries unfriendly to religious liberty employ violent persecution. Some do little to prevent acts of private violence. Others institute pervasive discrimination and pressure. Sometimes social and political pressure merge.

The Commission placed 15 states on its Special Watch List: Afghanistan, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Central African Republic, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nicaragua, Sudan, Turkey, Uzbekistan. Here as well, one commissioner, Johnnie Moore, curiously dissented from several designations largely on political grounds, undermining the body's supposedly objective role.

Twelve of the nations are Muslim, which reflects the fact that every majority-Muslim nation mistreats religious minorities. They often differ in degree and sometimes in kind. Nevertheless, that is the single most common characteristic of governments which persecute.

Second is authoritarianism, especially being a current or former communist state. Cuba and the three Central Asian Muslim states fall into this category. Nicaragua is a fellow traveler, at least. Which leaves the Central African Republic, a majority-Christian country in which blame for sectarian violence is shared but the violence was first triggered by the depredations of Muslim militias.

Finally, the Commission pointed to negative trends last year which threatened religious liberty. For instance, Beijing asserted its malign influence beyond its own borders. Anti-Semitism was on the rise in some countries. Despite widespread criticism of much-abused blasphemy laws,

some governments increased penalties for violations. Religious freedom suffered due to government suppression of people of faith for social or political reasons. Houses of worship came under attack. Governments, most notably Saudi Arabia and Iran, exported their repressive religious systems.

The problems are great while the solutions are few. Washington has little ability to reach into other societies and end their grievous violations of religious liberty. Most administrations prioritize geopolitics, hence the president's shameful extended genuflection to the Saudi monarchy. The Trump administration also lets Bahrain, Egypt, and Turkey off easy for political reasons.

Even for a president who cared about international religious persecution, sanctions would be no answer, since governments rarely abandon fundamental political objectives because their people are suffering. Indeed, every Trump administration campaign highlighted by increased economic penalties has failed: Russia, Venezuela, Cuba, North Korea, Iran, and Syria. In several cases there is little more that the U.S. could do, having ramped up sanctions for other issues, such as nuclear nonproliferation. The final remedy, war, is no humanitarian instrument and there is no political support for wandering the globe in what would be perceived as a modern crusade against other faiths.

What Washington could do better, however, is not embracing, subsidizing, and defending repressive regimes except in exceptional circumstances. Such necessity is rarely present today. Moreover, the U.S. should stop promiscuously and carelessly intervening to create chaos in which religious extremism and tyranny flourish. The invasion of Iraq ousted a secular regime, triggered a sectarian conflict which largely destroyed the indigenous Christian community, and spawned an insurgent/terrorist group which targeted religious minorities and Shia in both Iraq and Syria. Washington's support for insurgents in Syria, including more than a few radicals, threatened with destruction the Christian and Alawite communities there.

The government's failure should not stop Americans, in and out of churches, synagogues, and temples, from joining together to support the oppressed around the world. There is value in exposing and shaming persecutors. And embarrassing government officials whose policies undermine the right and opportunity of people of faith to live their beliefs.

We should stand by our brothers and sisters around the globe as they seek to understand the transcendent and respond accordingly. By protecting them, we defend human community that is both free and virtuous.

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