

The Perilous State of Religious Freedom Worldwide

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China is the world's most active — though not yet most vicious — persecutor of religious believers. The plight of Muslim Uyghurs confined to reeducation camps has gained global attention. However, the Chinese Communist Party targets members of every faith, including Christians, Buddhists, and Taoists. Like Islam, Christianity is viewed as a foreign, and therefore dangerous, import.

Earlier this month, [Radio Free Asia reported](#) that the Chinese government is attempting to force believers to renounce their faith. RFA interviewed a Christian who was detained in a raid on a house church. He was held and mistreated for ten months in what he described as “a mobile facility, that could just set up in some basement somewhere.” His description of his treatment matched accounts from former Uyghur and Falun Gong prisoners.

This effort at “reprogramming” is but one aspect of a multifaceted attempt to either eradicate or “Sinicize,” meaning communize, the Christian faith. Many churches have been closed. Those that remain open have been forced to display pictures of CCP chieftain Xi Jinping, display party propaganda, and install cameras.

Moreover, the Xi regime now bars children from services. In mid April, [AsiaNews reported](#) that the government shuttered a Catholic orphanage run by the Sisters of Zhaoxian in Hebei Province. The authorities gave no explanation, but the CCP likely wanted to end contact between the nuns and children, many of whom were disabled. The action also furthers the campaign to close faith organizations.

Unfortunately, Beijing is not alone in warring against religious believers. The Catholic organization Aid to the Church in Need tracks the systematic attack on faith around the world and recently released its latest assessment, *Religious Freedom in the World: Report 2021*. The [organization explains that the volume](#) “is ACN’s principal research project, and has evolved considerably over the years, from being a small booklet to becoming a publication of approximately 800 pages, produced by a world-wide team.”

The crime of persecution is global. ACN notes that “today discrimination and persecution on the grounds of religious belief is a growing global phenomenon. Behind the violent conflicts, whether in Syria, Yemen, Nigeria, the Central African Republic or Mozambique — to mention only a few countries — are those in the shadows who, manipulating the deepest convictions of humanity, have instrumentalised religion in the search for power.”

Although serious research like that embodied in *Religious Freedom* is vital to expose pervasive attacks on religious believers, the struggle is intensely personal and practical. Father Emmanuel Yousaf, national director of Pakistan's National Commission for Justice and Peace, penned the report's foreword. "I have worked in rural communities in which Christians were not respected due to their faith," he writes. They

were banned from shops, restaurants and cafes; in such places, our faithful were not allowed to touch glasses or other eating implements used by the majority community. And we have supported girls from minority faith backgrounds who are particularly at risk. These are children who, despite the fact that they are only minors, are kidnapped, forced to convert and marry — and they also suffer rape and other abuse.

Religious Freedom explores the complexity of the issue. The study rates as "red" countries that engage in religious persecution. This group has an outsize impact, as it "includes 26 countries which are home to 3.9 billion people or just over half (51 percent) of the world's population. This classification includes 12 African countries and two countries where investigations of possible genocide are ongoing, namely China and Myanmar (Burma)."

The People's Republic of China is the most populous nation and largest persecutor. Its controls are not (yet, anyway) as totalitarian as those in North Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Eritrea. However, Beijing's hostility to faith afflicts far more people. The death of Mao Zedong led to a long but significant relaxation in state control over religion. Unfortunately, in recent years that liberalization has been reversed.

The report details how the state presents

"Western" values, Western constitutional democracy and Western-style free media as in conflict with the Chinese Communist Party's values and states that petitions and letters calling for protection of human rights are the work of 'Western anti-China forces.' The new NGO law, which came into force in January 2017, gives the authorities power to restrict the work of foreign groups in the country, and to limit the ability of local groups to receive foreign funding and work with foreign organizations. Foreign NGOs must be sponsored by a Chinese government organisation, be registered with the police, and be under the supervision of the Public Security Bureau. Foreigners or members of foreign organizations deemed to be involved in activities aimed at "splitting the state, damaging national unity or subverting state power" can be detained, barred from leaving the country, or deported.

Xi appears to be determined to become the new Mao. According to the report, five years ago Xi explained to senior party leaders "that 'religious groups . . . must adhere to the leadership of the Communist Party.' Party members must be 'unyielding Marxist atheists' who 'resolutely guard against overseas infiltrations via religious means.' This followed a speech by the director of China's State Administration for Religious Affairs, who told a seminar on the Sinicization of Christianity that 'Chinese Christian theology should be compatible with the country's path of socialism.'" That is, Xi wants to remake the faith into a Sino-Leninist variant.

Unfortunately, new technologies are expanding the opportunity for oppression, an issue addressed in a separate chapter:

Faith groups perceived as a direct challenge to a jealous atheist system are, and will increasingly be, watched. The most egregious violation of religious freedom is that perpetrated against the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang state. As part of a “Strike Hard Campaign against Violent Terrorism” program, approximately one million out of a total population of 13 million Turkic Muslims are imprisoned in “re-education camps” and subject to mass arbitrary detention, torture, and mistreatment.

The second-most populous nation, majority-Hindu India, also presents a serious problem that has worsened dramatically in the past few years, though Delhi’s offenses are of a different magnitude. ACN explains:

Although interreligious tensions have been a major issue in India dating back to the independence movement and the 1947 partition that created the independent nations of India and Pakistan, the political, social and cultural influence of Hindu nationalist groups, collectively known as Sangh Parivar (family organisation or association), like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Organisation, RSS), has grown dramatically since Modi’s election. Members of various Sangh Parivar organizations now hold senior positions in the government, the military, and academia.

ACN rates as “orange” nations that practice discrimination (often simply a less virulent form of persecution). This offense afflicts more countries than in the red category though fewer people overall: “36 countries, home to 1.24 billion people. Slight improvements are identified in nine countries, while the situation in 20 countries is worsening.”

Among the problem states is Egypt, under a dictatorship worse than the long-lived Mubarak regime. “Although religious conversion is not prohibited by law, in practice the government does not recognize conversions from Islam,” ACN notes. “The law does not recognize the Baha’i faith or its religious laws and bans Baha’i institutions and community activities. Baha’is do not have recourse to civil law for personal status matters. The same applies to Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

Nor have Christians prospered, despite attempts by the Sisi regime to appeal for their support. The report notes:

In August 2016, the Egyptian parliament adopted a new Church Construction Law to facilitate the construction, renovation and legal recognition of churches. However, escalating attacks, administrative obstacles and failure by the state to stem social violence against Christians when they try to build, restore or just have their churches recognised reveals a huge gap between the law and everyday life. More worrisome is the fact that security agencies have repeatedly failed to protect Copts and prevent attacks against churches and Coptic properties.

Cuba is a largely Christian nation in which Christians face pervasive restrictions. Neither law nor practice is friendly toward believers. The ACN explains that the “Cuban Penal Code says that anyone who ‘abuses freedom of worship as guaranteed by the Constitution’” faces prison. Cuban

law “warns that anyone who belongs to or is affiliated with ‘an association that is not listed in the appropriate registry’ can be punished.” Anyone participating “in meetings or protests held by this type of association will be sanctioned.” Moreover, “the Office of Religious Affairs of the Central Committee of the Communist Party administers the different aspects of religious life: it approves or denies visits by foreigners to religious associations; authorises the construction, repair or acquisition of places of worship; grants permits to perform public religious services; oversees the importation of religious literature, etc.” The communist government also authorizes itself to “regulate and restrict the use of places of worship.”

Next come nations “under observation,” those “where newly emerging factors of concern have been observed which have the potential to cause a fundamental breakdown in freedom of religion.” Unfortunately, in countries in all categories, hate crimes occur “in the form of attacks with a bias against religious people and property.” Threats to religious liberty can occur in any country, even those not currently designated as a significant problem.

A number of factors have spurred persecution of religious believers worldwide. ACN emphasizes the following:

So-called Islamic State and Al-Qaeda, with ideological and material patronage from the Middle East, affiliate with, and further radicalise, local armed militias to establish ‘caliphate provinces’ along the Equator. . . .

Islamist terrorists employ sophisticated digital technologies to recruit, radicalise and attack. . . .

Pre-existing societal prejudices against religious minorities in countries like China, Niger, Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan led to increased discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic. . . .

Groundswell movements of majoritarian religious nationalism — manipulated by governments and by co-opted religious leaders — led to the rise of majoritarian ethno-religious supremacy in Hindu-majority and Buddhist-majority countries in Asia. . . .

Crimes against girls and women abducted, raped, and obliged to change their faith in forced conversions, were recorded in a growing number of countries. . . .

AI-enhanced surveillance cameras and smartphone scanners at key pedestrian checkpoints, producing data which is cross-referenced by analytical platforms and coupled with an integrated social credit system, will ensure that religious leaders and the faithful adhere to the edicts of the Chinese Communist Party. . . .

Muslims in China and Myanmar (including Uyghur and Rohingya Muslims) face severe persecution. . . .

New cultural norms, enshrined in law, result in an individual’s rights to freedom of conscience and religion coming into a profound conflict with the legal obligation to comply with these laws. . . .

Although Asia, because of populous China and India, is the greatest fount of persecution, Africa joins the Middle East as the most important locations of violent, even murderous persecution. ACN explains:

Sub-Saharan Africa is ripe for the infiltration of Islamist ideologies. On account of generations of poverty, corruption, pre-existing intercommunal violence between herders and farmers over land rights (exacerbated by the consequences of climate change) and weak state structures, this area has become a breeding ground for marginalised and frustrated young men. This in turn has become a recruitment opportunity for extremists who prey on them with promises of wealth, power, and the ousting of corrupt authorities. This is bound all the more closely to the core of the human person by a profound manipulation of religion. Battle-hardened Islamist extremists have moved south from the plains of Iraq and Syria to link up with local criminal groups in the Sub-Saharan countries of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, northern Cameroon, Chad, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia and Mozambique.

The human and community cost has been huge. Americans have personal knowledge of the carnage in the Middle East, having been both victims and, tragically, triggers of religious conflict there. The violence in Africa is less well known, yet religious liberty is violated in 23 of 54 nations there. In a dozen states, persecution is severe. People are dying in religious wars little known in America or elsewhere in the West.

“The violence is horrific,” the ACN reports:

Boys are forced into the ranks as child soldiers, rape is used as a weapon of war, and there are mass beheadings of men — Muslims and Christians alike — who dare refuse to join the jihadists. Research by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project reveals that the number of people killed by armed groups in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, and Mali from January to mid-April 2020 more than doubled compared to the same period in 2019; and in Burkina Faso, as of February 2020, 765,000 people had been displaced by terrorist groups, up from 65,000 in the 12

Perhaps the most harrowing presentation in the volume is the chart assessing movement since the last report in 2018. Most arrows point down. Among the 26 “red” countries, only Pakistan improved. Among the 36 “orange” malefactors, nine improved and four remained unchanged. Most persecutors are authoritarian. Those regimes with a religious focus are overwhelmingly Muslim. A few are avowedly ethnoreligious and nationalistic.

Religious Freedom in the World is a magnificent source of information about the persecuted. Alas, it offers fewer answers. But that reflects the complexity of the problem rather than any failure in the analysis.

Looking to Washington for answers is a mistake. Although designation of an ambassador for religious liberty was a positive step, as was the formation of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, the U.S. government has done much to contribute to the problem. American military power is more apt to destroy than to construct: The invasion of Iraq had catastrophic consequences for Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq and well

beyond. The impact of economic sanctions does not distinguish by religion. For instance, Washington's perverse attempt to force regime change by starving Syria's civilian population harms religious minorities alongside everyone else, irrespective of support for Bashar al-Assad. Washington's tight political embrace of oppressive regimes such as those of Egypt and Saudi Arabia limits America's ability to promote human rights, including religious liberty. And the overwhelming importance typically placed on security and economic interests reduces every administration's ability and even interest in addressing persecution by such adversaries, and potential adversaries, as North Korea, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and China.

Washington's failure puts a premium on people of good will of all faiths to support the persecuted and to press for change. There are organizations, such as Aid to the Church in Need, and many more — of different religious denominations and even no faith commitment — to support. There are criminal regimes to embarrass and shame. And there are victims, so many victims — the threatened, the terrorized, the imprisoned, the beaten, the murdered — to pray for, console, assist, and defend.

Surely that is the least that those of us living amid safety and plenty should do.

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