

NATIONAL REVIEW

A New Ranking of Nations Where Christians Are Persecuted Most

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The group Open Doors has released the latest iteration of its World Watch List. The ranking covers the worst 50 nations with respect to religious persecution of Christians. Most nations on the list are perennials, instantly recognized by those who follow the issue. The details vary a bit year by year, but the outcome of this tragic sport rarely changes much.

Indeed, one imagines religious persecutors involved in a competition to see which state can be more inhospitable to freedom of conscience. There is an aging champ, still in the lead but closely trailed by new aspirants. A previous contender reemerges for a new run at the top prize. Most of those seeking victory have different strengths. Some competitors emphasize direct government repression, others vicious social pressure. A favorite technique is mob violence with official acquiescence. There are more.

Open Doors noted some broad trends. The People's Republic of China has been using technology for dramatically ill ends. Less dramatically, India, too, is using facial recognition. Overall, "in the most populated countries on earth, Christians live in a surveillance state."

Although the Middle East has traditionally been the fount of Islamist violence, "sub-Saharan Africa is increasingly under threat from Islamic extremist groups. Particularly in countries or in regions where government control is weak or non-existent, these groups are killing, kidnapping and sowing chaos with impunity." Alas, the violence is not limited to Africa. "Militant Islam spreads violence and fear in Southeast and South Asia." For instance, Sri Lanka, long the host of a brutish Buddhism that battered Christian believers, saw Islamist terrorist attacks on Christians.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy, at least symbolically, is the threatened disappearance of Christians from the birthplace of the faith in the Middle East. Christians continue to leave Palestinian territories and are under siege in Syria but persist in areas ruled by Bashar al-Assad, an Alawite, which is an offshoot of Shia Islam. Worst in the region is Iraq. Explained Open Doors: "Years of conflict in Iraq continue to devastate Christian communities. In Iraq, there are now around 202,000 Christians, down from 1.5 million before 2003." Notably, this is the direct result of Washington's ouster of Saddam Hussein, a secular dictator who cared nothing for Islam in practice.

Some of the ratings are likely to be controversial. Is Saudi Arabia, which bans any public services by non-Muslims, really only number 13? And why is China, reverting to Mao-style

totalitarianism, with a brutal ongoing campaign against religious practices, judged to be only number 23, behind Egypt and Laos, among others?

The longtime champion of religious persecution, North Korea, retains the title. It is nominally a Communist state, but in practice the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has enshrined Kim worship: Leaders of the Kim dynasty, now in the third generation, are treated as divine. Competitive beliefs are viewed very badly. "If North Korean Christians are discovered, they are deported to labor camps as political criminals or even killed on the spot. Driven by the state, Christian persecution in North Korea is extreme."

Closing the gap is Afghanistan, which after nearly two decades of U.S. support fell just short of overtaking the DPRK. "The country is increasingly challenged by Islamic militants, the Taliban controls or contests more and more areas, and an ISIS-affiliated group also targets minorities."

Islam continues to be featured by the No. 3 contestant, Somalia, which "remains mired in civil war, tribalism, and violent Islamic militancy." Conversion is "regarded as a betrayal of the Somali family and clan," and al-Shabab militants target converts.

Next is another U.S. project, Libya. "The absence of a single central government to uphold law and order contributes to the extreme levels of pressure in national and church life. Libyan Christians with a Muslim background face violent and intense pressure to renounce their faith."

In fifth place is a perennial contender, Pakistan. Filled with extremists and militants, host of Osama bin-Laden, and long-term Taliban ally, this country seems destined to be inhospitable to Christians and other religious minorities. Christian churches "are heavily monitored, and extremists regularly target them for attacks." Churches involved in evangelism face greater threats. Moreover, "anti-blasphemy laws are disproportionately applied against the Christian minority — making it difficult and dangerous to live out one's faith in public."

Coming in at No. 6 is Eritrea, nearly equally divided between Christians and Muslims. It long has been called Africa's North Korea. Everyone suffers at the hands of a suffocating totalitarian state. "Hundreds of Christians who are members of unregistered churches are in prison; some have been held captive for over a decade."

Next comes Sudan, in which persecution has worsened in recent years: "The government has arrested or intimidated many Christian leaders, and numerous churches have been demolished." However, last year the Islamist dictator was overthrown. No one knows where Sudan will ultimately end up, but almost certainly at a better place than in the past. Sudan might fall dramatically in the ratings in coming years.

Yemen is No. 8. Never known for religious tolerance, Yemen has been traumatized by nearly five years of war. Noted Open Doors: "The war has allowed radical Islamic groups to expand their operations in certain areas, leading to Christians being abducted and killed. Open church activities are forbidden and leaving Islam is not allowed."

Minority faiths are allowed to practice in Iran, which fills the No. 9 position. That contrasts with Tehran's primary antagonist, Saudi Arabia. However, life is not easy: "Christians are forbidden from sharing their faith with non-Christians in Iran, and it is illegal to produce Christian literature or hold church services in Farsi. Converts from Islam face persecution," and those who attend house churches "face the constant threat of arrest."

India rounds out the top ten. Prime Minister Narendra Modi turned out to be a great disappointment. On economics, he proved to believe in abundant state control, just of a different sort. Worse, his philosophy was built around Hindu nationalism. Since his party has taken control, “incidents against Christians have increased, and Hindu radicals often attack Christians with little to no consequence.” Muslims, who make up a more substantial proportion of the population than Christians do, also face sometimes violent persecution.

The next ten are: Syria, ravaged by war and led by Islamist insurgents; Nigeria, where two separate groups of Islamist militants have waged war on Christians and moderate Muslims; Saudi Arabia, where no public worship by non-Muslims is allowed; Maldives, which bases citizenship on practicing Islam and bars any other public worship; Iraq, where the U.S. invasion eliminated the secular dictator, opening the way for sectarian war; Egypt, where Christian Copts face official discrimination and community violence; Algeria, where the government has been closing churches while family pressure against conversion remains strong; Uzbekistan, where “the government heavily restricts religious expression, outlawing all unsanctioned religious expression”; Myanmar, where largely ethnic-minority Christians face intense pressure (and where the Muslim Rohingya have been murdered or dispersed); and Laos, where “Christian gatherings are monitored, and even registered churches are often forced to meet in homes.”

The trends are evident as well in the next 30 persecutors cited by Open Doors: Vietnam, Turkmenistan, China, Mauritania, Central African Republic, Morocco, Qatar, Burkina Faso, Mali, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Nepal, Jordan, Tunisia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Brunei, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malaysia, Colombia, Oman, Kuwait, Kenya, Bhutan, Russian Federation, United Arab Emirates, Cameroon, Indonesia, and Niger.

The fate of Christians and other religious minorities varies greatly across the globe. Believers in America suffer manifold frustrations, unfairness, and inconvenience; some even find their livelihoods threatened. Still, most U.S. Christians have never faced anything approaching the sort of persecution that is common elsewhere around the world.

Intolerant interpretations of Islam are the greatest structural enemy of religious liberty. Second-greatest is authoritarianism in regimes that are determined to suppress freedom of conscience, thought, speech, and worship. A variety of other factors follow, such as Buddhist, Hindu, and Orthodox nationalism. Although the Americas have some problems, most notably Communist dictatorships in Cuba and Venezuela, the region remains the freest when it comes to religious practice. Africa, Asia, and the Middle East all are filled with frequently worsening persecution.

Americans should fight to preserve their own First Amendment liberties. However, U.S. believers also should support those abroad who are targeted for their faith. Winners of the international persecution contest should be criticized, embarrassed, and punished. Americans might be frustrated to find that even they cannot save the world. However, they can help individuals, families, and communities. And that always is an achievement worth celebrating.

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