



Our World of Persecution and Intolerance

Countless nations still trample religious liberty.

By Doug Bandow

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The 21st century is supposed to be a time of liberal enlightenment. But the reality looks very different. Instead of a world of mutual understanding and tolerance, people around the globe face spreading violence and human rights abuses. Religious persecution continues to rise.

The latest report from the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom documents the worst manifestations of this attack on the most basic liberty of conscience. Now in its 15th year, the Commission [reflected](#) on the importance of religious freedom, which “means the right of all human beings to think as they please, believe or not believe as their conscience leads, and live out their beliefs openly, peacefully, and without fear.”

The issues ultimately are not abstract and theoretical, but real and practical. Observed the USCIRF: “When religious freedom is abridged, real people—as well as their families, communities, and countries—pay a price.” People are murdered, worshipers are imprisoned, girls are kidnapped, homes are destroyed, businesses are ruined, and much more because some employ power or violence against those who believe differently.

More broadly, religious persecution operates as the proverbial canary in the mine, indicating the existence of intolerance and hatred which are incubators for violence that can undermine entire societies and spawn terrorist attacks even beyond national borders. Governments that are unwilling or unable to protect the liberty to act on the deepest held beliefs about one’s creator are unlikely to safeguard other freedoms of conscience. To betray religious liberty, explained the Commission, “is to betray human nature and well-being; to affirm it is to affirm our very humanity and its thriving.” Unfortunately, a shocking number of nations care little about human nature and even less about human thriving.

Dozens of countries abuse religious liberty. The USCIRF concentrates on the 26 worst. Sixteen are Tier 1 “Countries of Particular Concern,” which means “any country whose government engages in or tolerates particularly severe violations of religious freedom that are systematic, ongoing and egregious.”

Burma. The country is changing politically, though it remains far from a functioning democracy that respects the rule of law and protects civil liberties. Unfortunately, recent reforms “have not improved legal protections for religious freedom and have done little to curtail anti-Muslim violence, incitement and discrimination,” particularly targeting the Rohingya Muslim minority.

There also was violence and discrimination against ethnic Kamans, who are Muslims, and “ethnic minority Christians faced serious abuses during recent military incursions in Kachin State.”

China. This communist giant has not reformed politically. Moreover, “the Chinese government continues to perpetrate particularly severe violations of religious freedom. For Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims, conditions are worse now than at any time in the past decade. Independent Catholics and Protestants face arrests, fines, and the shuttering of their places of worship. Practitioners of Falun Gong, as well as other Buddhist, folk, religions, and Protestant groups deemed ‘superstitious’ or ‘evil cults,’ face long jail terms, forced renunciations of faith, and torture in detention.”

Egypt. Christians are suffering in the midst of Egypt’s turmoil. There were some improvements after the fall of Hosni Mubarak, but “the Morsi-era government and the interim government failed or were slow to protect religious minorities, particularly Coptic Orthodox Christians, from violence.” Moreover, despite the military’s faux return to democracy, “discriminatory and repressive laws and policies that restrict freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief remain in place.” In fact, Egypt is one of several nations which imprison their citizens for “blasphemy,” a charge often used against religious minorities.

Eritrea. Called the North Korea of Africa, Eritrea is one of the world’s most repressive states. The regime’s totalitarian nature leads to widespread religious persecution. “Systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations continue in Eritrea,” which “include torture or other ill-treatment of religious prisoners, arbitrary arrests and detentions without charges, a prolonged ban on public religious activities, and interference in the internal affairs of registered religious groups. The religious freedom situation is particularly grave for Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians and Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

Iran. Change may be afoot in Iran, but if so it has yet to benefit non-Shia Muslims. During last year’s presidential election “the already-poor religious freedom conditions in Iran continued to deteriorate, particularly for religious minorities, especially Baha’is and Christian converts. Sufi and Sunni Muslims and dissenting Shi’a Muslims also faced harassment, arrests, and imprisonment. The government of Iran continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention, torture, and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused.”

Iraq. Saddam Hussein was a notably brutal thug, but cared little about religion and elevated a nominal Christian to top positions in his government. Today religious minorities are targets of widespread violence. “In the past year the government failed to stem egregious and increasing violence by non-state actors against Iraqi civilians, including attacks targeting religious pilgrims and worshippers, religious sites, and leaders, as well as individuals for their actual or assumed religious identity.” The country’s slide back towards Shi’a-Sunni conflict further threatens all religious minorities.

Nigeria. In this African state sharply divided between Muslims and Christians, I saw mosques give way to churches as I traveled south during a recent trip. “Nigeria’s democracy is being

tested by recurring sectarian violence, attacks and threats against Christians by Boko Haram, and the misuse of religion by politicians, religious leaders, and others.” Although the government itself does not persecute, “it tolerates severe violations through its failure to bring to justice those responsible for systematic, ongoing, and egregious religious freedom violations, or to prevent or contain sectarian violence.”

North Korea. The world’s most oppressive dictatorship is in its third generation of monarchical communism. “Individuals engaged in clandestine religious activity are arrested, tortured, imprisoned, and sometimes executed. Thousands of religious believers and their families are imprisoned in penal labor camps, including refugees repatriated from China.” There may be no worse persecutor on earth.

Pakistan. Although nominally both an ally and a democracy, Pakistan is no friend of religious freedom. “In the past year, conditions hit an all-time low due to chronic sectarian violence targeting mostly Shi’a Muslims but also Christians, Ahmadis, and Hindus.” The government did little to halt the attacks. Moreover, “Pakistan’s repressive blasphemy laws and anti-Ahmadi laws are widely used to violate religious freedoms and foster a climate of impunity.”

Saudi Arabia. An ally but undemocratic, Saudi Arabia is essentially totalitarian. This country “remains unique in the extent to which it restricts the public expression of any religion other than Islam. Not a single church or other non-Muslim house of worship exists in the country.” Moreover, the government “has arrested individuals for dissent, apostasy, blasphemy, and sorcery.” By underwriting extremist Islamic educational materials worldwide, the Saudi royal family also has helped foster the kind of hatred which has fueled terrorist violence elsewhere.

Sudan. Although the secession of South Sudan ended the long-running and murderous conflict in which religion played a role, Sudan’s government “continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of freedom of religion or belief. It imposes a restrictive interpretation of Shari’ah law on Muslims and non-Muslims alike, using amputations and floggings for crimes and acts of ‘indecent’ and ‘immorality’ and arresting Christians for proselytizing.” Violence also is a problem. “Governmental and non-governmental attacks on the Christian community also continue.”

Syria. Although the Assad dictatorship always was ruthless, it also always was nonsectarian. In fact, the country became a refuge for Christians escaping Iraq. In the midst of civil war, however, the regime battles Sunni Muslims, while extremist opponents “target religious minority communities, including Christians and Alawites, because of their faith, and internationally-recognized opposition military groups have committed religious freedom violations when working with other groups to secure strategic areas.”

Tajikistan. Central Asia is one of the worst areas for religious liberty. In Tajikistan “the government suppresses and punishes all religious activity independent of state control, particularly the activities of Muslims, Protestants, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. The government also imprisons individuals on unproven criminal allegations linked to Islamic religious activity and affiliation.”

Turkmenistan. This former Soviet republic hosts “particularly severe religious freedom violations.” Despite some recent improvements, “the country’s laws, policies, and practices violate international human rights norms, including those on freedom of religion or belief. Police raids and harassment of registered and unregistered religious groups continue.”

Uzbekistan. Like its neighbors, Uzbekistan suppresses political and religious liberty alike. The authorities impose “a highly restrictive religion law and harsh penalties on all independent religious activity. The government also imprisons individuals who do not conform to officially-prescribed practices or who it claims are extremist.”

Vietnam. America’s old antagonist is looking to America as an ally against China and has liberalized economically. However, “despite some positive changes over the past decade, the Vietnamese government continues to imprison individuals for religious activity or religious freedom advocacy. It uses a specialized religious police force and vague national security laws to suppress independent Buddhist, Protestant, Hoa Hao, and Cao Dai activities, and seeks to stop the growth of ethnic minority Protestantism and Catholicism via discrimination, violence, and forced renunciations of their faith.”

Another ten countries are Tier 2—almost CPCs—where there are “serious” violations and “at least one of the elements of the ‘systematic, ongoing, and egregious’ standard” is present. These states look good only in comparison to those in Tier 1.

Afghanistan, supported by U.S. force of arms, refused to protect religious freedom for “dissenting Sunni Muslims, as well as Shi’a Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Bahai’s.” **Azerbaijan** has been moving backwards: “Registration requests from religious organizations have been delayed or denied, religious groups closed, and in the past year non-violent religious activists have been detained, fined, and imprisoned.” In **Cuba** there was “harassment of religious leaders and laity, interference in religious groups’ internal affairs, and pressure to prevent democracy and human rights activists from participating in religious activities.”

Although nominally a secular democracy, **India** “has struggled to protect minority communities or provide justice when crimes occur,” most notably “communal and religiously-motivated violence.” In **Indonesia** tolerance has given way with “the detentions of individuals considered religiously ‘deviant’ and the ongoing intimidation, discrimination, and violence against religious minorities, including Ahmadis, Christians, Shi’a, Sufis, Hindus, Baha’is, and followers of indigenous religions.” Central Asia’s **Kazakhstan** “bans unregistered religious activity and has been enforced through the closing of religious organizations, police raids, detentions, and fines.”

Laos is a communist relic in which “serious religious freedom abuses continue, particularly in ethnic minority areas, and restrictive laws remain in place.” In **Malaysia** there are “inadequate legal protections for religious minorities and ethnic Malays who wish to change their religion, bans on certain publications and groups considered religiously ‘deviant,’ including Shi’a, and expanded efforts to arrest and harass members of such groups.” **Russia** has seen a deterioration in human rights generally, and “the anti-extremism law was used against religious individuals and groups, particularly Jehovah’s Witnesses and Muslim readers of Turkish theologian Said Nursi,” while the blasphemy law “further curtailed the freedoms of religion, belief, and

expression.” Although the Erdogan government has relaxed state interference with religious liberty in **Turkey**, aspects of the country’s past policy of ruthless secularism live on, leading “to governmental interference and restrictions that hinder full religious freedom,” especially for religious minorities.

These are merely the worst, and not the only, violators of religious liberty. The Commission also is monitoring Bahrain, Bangladesh, Belarus, Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Kyrgyzstan, Sri Lanka, and even countries in Europe. Religious believers may at times feel under siege in the U.S., but they are not persecuted. In contrast, real persecution exists in many countries overseas.

Sadly, there is little outsiders can do in many of these cases. The USCIRF proposed that Washington demonstrate a stronger commitment to the issue, and any dialogue over human rights should include the status of religious liberty. However, even in the best of circumstances the government always will balance efforts to promote religious liberty with attempts to achieve important economic, political, and security ends. Moreover, there always will be limits to what changes outsiders can force in other nations. Americans would not react well to foreign attempts to transform U.S. policy and society.

Still, there’s no reason for the American people to wait for their government to act. Individuals should write letters to persecuting governments, protest officials and organizations of unfree states, and complain to business leaders and others from countries which limit religious liberty. Americans should urge the U.S. government to accept religious refugees and open their own homes to those who escape foreign oppression. Believers should press their churches, synagogues, mosques, and other religious communities to advocate on behalf of the freedom of all to practice their faiths. And those of us who enjoy America’s bountiful liberties at home should support organizations seeking to spread those freedoms abroad.

Freedom of conscience is the bedrock foundation for all liberties. Unfortunately, this most basic human right is widely violated around the globe. Americans should advocate for religious liberty for all.

***Doug Bandow** is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties. He worked as special assistant to President Reagan and editor of the political magazine Inquiry. He writes regularly for leading publications such as Fortune magazine, National Interest, Wall Street Journal, and Washington Times. Bandow speaks frequently at academic conferences, on college campuses, and to business groups. Bandow has been a regular commentator on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, Fox News Channel, and MSNBC. He holds a J.D. from Stanford University.*