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America falling short on protecting religious liberty

By Doug Bandow

The U.S. government has long promoted human rights. However, religious liberty has typically received minimal attention, and been subordinated to other American objectives, such as confronting communism and terrorism.

More than a decade ago Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), which provided for the appointment of an ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom. The ambassador is to serve as a “principal adviser to the president and secretary of state” on this issue and promote religious liberty around the world.



It's not an easy task, but it's a natural issue for President Barack Obama. Last year he stated in his Cairo speech: “People in every country should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind and the heart and the soul.”

Allowing people spiritual space has practical benefits around the world. Thomas Farr, a former director of the Office of International Religious Freedom, cites the work of the Pew Forum's Brian Grim, who “has found that religious liberty means less religious persecution and thus less conflict.”

But standing for religious liberty isn't just good policy. It is good politics. One way for President Obama to deflect criticism from conservative Christian activists would be to actively defend the right of Christians, as well as Jews and other religious minorities, to practice their faith.

Yet religious liberty appears to be an almost nonexistent priority for this administration. As Farr points out, the U.S. National Security Strategy didn't even mention religious freedom as a “value.” Not until June 15, nearly 15 months after he took office, did the president nominate the ambassador-at-large, and he did so only after public prodding by the House International Religious Freedom Caucus, among others. (The Bush administration was even worse, taking 19 months to nominate an ambassador.)

President Obama's nominee, Dr. Suzan Johnson Cook, has no obvious qualifications for the job. Although talented, her past work has not involved international religious freedom. She has no known diplomatic experience. Her nomination appears to be intended to satisfy domestic constituencies — for instance, she was an adviser on President Bill Clinton's Domestic Policy Council.

Equally worrisome is the fact that the administration has further diminished the Office of International Religious Freedom bureaucratically. If confirmed — though there is skepticism about her nomination, it is not clear there will be outright opposition — Cook will report to the assistant secretary for democracy, human rights, and labor, not the secretary of state. Moreover, the office's employees will be largely out of her control.

Some critics believe the president is consciously undermining IRFA to satisfy more secular liberal political constituencies. That is unlikely, but by the time Dr. Cook is likely to be confirmed her first job will be to present a religious freedom assessment in which she had no hand preparing. Most of the year will be gone before she gets up to

speed on persecution issues. Roughly half of the president's first term will be over.

However, the administration could help make up for lost time by upgrading the ambassador and the office. Dr. Cook should attend the secretary of state's daily briefing. The office should report to her. The secretary of state and president should speak out on the issue.

Moreover, as Dennis Hoover of the Institute for Global Engagement suggests, there needs to be "a more comprehensive integration — intellectually and institutionally — of religious freedom into the mainstream of U.S. foreign policy." Most directly, that means support for religious liberty should be part of the larger conversation about human rights.

Freedom of conscience includes the rights to convert, practice, and evangelize. Governments which prohibit their people from responding to the deepest spiritual impulses are unlikely to countenance those same people thinking independently about politics.

Finally, diplomatic officials and military officers alike should understand how religious liberty plays into security concerns, particularly regarding terrorism. Although many factors, including a promiscuously interventionist U.S. foreign policy, encourage terrorism, more tolerant societies are far less likely to serve as incubators for violent extremism.

The Obama administration has talked much about increased engagement and improved outreach abroad. But it has neglected to offer effective support for one of the most important human rights, religious liberty. It would be tragic if the president who has done so much to raise expectations of America around the world did not work to encourage greater respect for religious liberty abroad.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and the senior fellow in International Religious Persecution at the Institute on Religion and Public Policy. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of "Beyond Good Intentions: A Biblical View of Politics" (Crossway). He can be reached at ChessSet@aol.com.