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[The Scandal of International Religious Persecution](#)

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In today's globalized world, dictatorships have an ever harder time hiding their repressive practices. Just witness the tragedy of Iran carried out in front of the world's eyes. The list of oppressors is long: North Korea, China, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Burma, Sudan, Cuba, and the Central Asian countries are among the world's most dedicated human rights abusers.

Most people think of political and civil freedoms when it comes to human rights. And the two are fundamental, to be sure. But most governments which violate these forms of individual liberty also suppress religious freedom.

Indeed, there is a good argument for treating religious liberty as the first freedom. If a government is unwilling to protect basic freedom of conscience when it comes to religious faith, then it is unlikely to tolerate political free-thinking either. In contrast, persuading repressive governments to carve out room for religious worship and practice may act as an important step in creating protected personal space.

Unfortunately, many nations violate this idea. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom issues an annual report summarizing the state of religious liberty around the globe. It makes for sober reading.

The USCIRF recently highlighted 27 nations. It recommended that the State Department designate 13 nations, those responsible for "particularly severe" violations of religious liberty, as "countries of particular concern" (CPCs). The Commission named another 11 states to its "Watch List" for engaging in "serious violations" and thus deserving close monitoring. Another three were cited for tolerating abuses and thus were deemed to warrant attention. The State Department tends to follow most USCIRF recommendations, but often with a political twist: in January it provided waivers for Saudi Arabia, America's number one source of oil, and Uzbekistan, seen by Washington as an important military partner.

The Commission's recommended CPCs are Burma, North Korea, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

Burma (or Myanmar) is a top contender on anyone's list of most misgoverned lands. Conditions have worsened over the past year. The Commission reported: "Burma's military regime continued its policy of severely restricting religious practice, monitoring the activity of all religious organizations, and perpetuating or tolerating violence against religious leaders and their communities." Largely Christian ethnic groups, such as the Karen and Karenni, continue to suffer in a war which has raged for decades in eastern Burma.

The **Democratic People's Republic of Korea** likely is worse. Observed the USCIRF: "there is little evidence that the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion exists in North Korea." The regime uses government-controlled religious federations to advance its political objectives. Alas, "anyone discovered engaging in clandestine religious practice faces official discrimination, arrest, imprisonment, and possibly execution."

Eritrea is another top persecutor. That government, explained the Commission, "continues to engage in systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom." Most at risk are members of faiths outside of the four officially recognized religions: Sunni Islam, and Coptic, Catholic, and Evangelical Christian. Some of the violations of religious freedom reflect an attempt to protect the Coptic Church, which has links to the government, from new evangelical and Pentecostal denominations.

Iran is one of the great Islamic persecutors. The USCIRF reported that "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." Unfortunately, just as political freedom is being circumscribed, religious liberty has been deteriorating. At particular risk are Baha'is, Sufi Muslims, and evangelical Christians. The situation likely will grow worse as the regime's political base shrinks, forcing it to increasingly rely on force to survive.

One of the greatest--and most tragic--ironies of the **Iraq** war is that through it Washington set in motion the destruction of the historic Christian community in that ancient land. Noted the Commission, "particularly since 2006, there have been alarming numbers of religiously-motivated killings, abductions, beatings, rapes, threats, intimidation, forced resettlements, and attacks on religious leaders, pilgrims, and holy sites." Everyone is vulnerable, especially during violent surges, but religious minorities, particularly Christians, Sabean Manaean, and Yazidis, are at greatest risk.

Communal violence in **Nigeria** is common, yet, warned the USCIRF, "The response of the government Nigeria to persistent religious freedom violations and violent sectarian and communal conflicts along religious lines has been inadequate and ineffectual." Additional problems include "the expansion of sharia (Islamic law) into the criminal codes of several northern Nigerian states; and discrimination against minority communities of Christians and Muslims."

Pakistan, one of the American government's most important allies, is home to what the Commission termed "the largely unchecked growth in the power and reach of religiously-motivated extremist groups." However, religious persecution precedes recent events. Discriminatory laws are in place and, reported the USCIRF: "Sectarian and religiously-motivated violence continues, particularly against Shi'a Muslims, Ahmadis, Christians, and Hindus, and the government's response continues to be insufficient, and in some cases, is outright complicit."

Although religious repression has ebbed since the days of the Cultural Revolution, **the People's Republic of China** "engages in systematic and egregious violations of the freedom of religion or belief," explained the Commission. There is a "growing 'zone of toleration' for religious worship and charitable activities," but the authorities continue to attempt to maintain control of religious practice. Step outside of the narrow prescribed limits, and "some religious adherents were detained, imprisoned, fined, beaten, and harassed."

Saudi Arabia, noted for its suppression of political dissent and women's rights, also is essentially totalitarian when it comes to religious worship. Despite promises of reform, the royal government "persists in banning all forms of public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of one school of Sunni Islam and even interferes with private religious practice." According to the Commission, the regime also "continues to be involved in supporting activities globally that promote an extremist ideology, and in some cases, violence toward non-Muslims and disfavored Muslims."

During **Sudan's** civil war, which lasted until 2005, the regime in Khartoum, explained the USCIRF, was "the world's most violent abuser of the right to freedom of religion or belief." Even today "The government of Sudan commits egregious and systematic violations of freedom of religion or belief in the areas under its control."

Although repression in **Turkmenistan** has eased since the death of President Saparmurat Niyazov, the Commission cited the government for "its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom." Indeed, religious practice was virtually banned as Niyazov's personality cult expanded.

Another problem Central Asian republic is **Uzbekistan**. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union, reported the USCIRF, "fundamental human rights, including freedom of religion or belief, have been under assault." Backed by a willingness to arrest dissenters, the government "severely limits the ability of religious communities to function and facilitates the Uzbek government's exercise of a high degree of control over religious communities and the approved manner in which the Islamic religion is practiced."

There has been some progress in **Vietnam**, leading the Bush administration to lift the "country of particular concern" designation in 2006, as part of Congress' approval of that nation's entry in the World Trade Organization. Yet, observed the Commission, "Individuals continue to be imprisoned or detained for reasons related to their religious activity or religious freedom advocacy; policy and government officials are not held fully accountable for abuses; independent religious activity remains illegal; and legal protections for government-approved religious organizations are both vague and subject to arbitrary or discriminatory interpretations based on political factors." Further, repression continues apace for some smaller religious groups.

These are merely the worst persecutors. The Commission placed on its Watch List Afghanistan, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia, Laos, Russia, Somalia, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Venezuela.

Conditions have been worsening in Afghanistan with the resurgence of the Taliban. The government of Belarus has systematically violated human rights since it emerged from the break-up of the Soviet Union. The Castro regime in Cuba treats religious organizations as a threat to its authority. Discrimination and violence against Coptic Christians and "non-conforming Muslims" is rife in Egypt. Indonesia has made progress towards democracy, but violence against religious minorities has increased, often with the acquiescence or even tacit support of the authorities.

In Laos, reported the USCIRF, "there have been arrests, detentions, forced renunciations of faith, and forced evictions from villages." The Putin/Medvedev regime has expanded state control over religious groups in Russia. There is no effective government in Somalia, where "radical interpretations of Islam are increasingly manifested." Attacks on religious liberty have been growing more serious in Tajikistan. Turkey limits the practice of Islam and discriminates against non-Muslim faiths. In Venezuela President Hugo Chavez's increasingly authoritarian tendencies have, warned the Commission, "created an environment where Jewish and Catholic religious leaders and institutions are at risk of attack."

Finally, the USCIRF pointed to Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, and Sri Lanka as worthy of scrutiny. All have hosted threats to religious liberty and sometimes tolerated violence against religious believers.

Although Washington cannot make fighting religious persecution a central element of U.S. foreign policy, it can include religious liberty as an essential aspect of its promotion of human rights. In particular, any dialogue with Muslim governments concerned about the treatment of Islam in the West should include a discussion of how those same regimes treat Jews, Christians, Baha'is, and other religious minorities. If the authorities in other nations are unwilling to protect the most basic freedom of conscience regarding religious faith, they are unlikely to be reliable defenders of broader political and civil liberties.

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