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Post-Communist Experience

By Doug Bandow

In much of the world people are not free to worship. The list of persecutors is long: in its latest report on religious liberty, the U.S. State Department highlights 30 nations. One of the most important causes is authoritarian politics.

It should come as no surprise that regimes dedicated to suppressing most human liberties would seek to limit religious expression.



Both communism and religion claim the whole person: they are in inherent conflict. Unfortunately, in many of these nations political repression lives on.

Azerbaijan

The constitution formally protects religious liberty. But the situation has been deteriorating. The State Department warns, "religions considered non-traditional" are subject to monitoring and harassment, and believers can be jailed.

The department's latest report notes: "There were mosque closures as well as state and locally sponsored raids on evangelical Protestant religious groups."

China

The People's Republic of China remains highly suspicious of religious faith. The U.S. report has designated China as a "country of particular concern" because of its abusive practices.

The authorities support so-called "patriotic religious associations," that is, politically compliant churches. Outside of the associations freedom to worship is constrained and contingent. The report says: "The ability of unregistered religious groups to operate varied greatly depending on their location."

Moreover, "The government repressed Protestant house church networks and cross-congressional affiliations, which it perceived as presenting a potential challenge to the authority of the government or the party."

Cuba

The Fidelistas attempt to suppress all religions other than the church of Castro. The state department's report says: "The government continued to assert itself over all aspects of social life, including religious expression. Religious groups complained about widespread surveillance and infiltration by state security agents."

Laos

The report points to the local level, where "Authorities in some of the country's 17 provinces continued to be suspicious of non-Buddhist religious communities and displayed intolerance for minority religious practice, particularly Protestant groups, whether or not they were officially recognized. Officials interfered with worship and detained believers."

North Korea

Perhaps the world's worst hell hole, the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea attempts to control all aspects of life. The report simply declares: "genuine religious freedom does not exist, and there was no change in the extremely poor level of respect for religious freedom."

Russia

The repression of the Communist era has disappeared. Nevertheless, the department reports on some warning signs as "the government did not always respect" constitutional provisions calling for equality of all religions.

At particular legal disadvantage were non-traditional groups, especially those viewed "as security threats," including Jehovah's Witnesses.

Tajikistan

Freedom declined over the last year, says the department, as "The government expanded its efforts to control virtually all aspects of religious life, and government officials actively monitored religious groups, institutions, and figures." The report adds, "the government targeted any religious organization it deemed to have foreign influence."

Turkmenistan

The department points to "troubling government practices in the treatment of some registered and unregistered groups continued." Most notably, "Government restricted registered groups' ability to own property, print or import religious materials, host foreign guests, and proselytize."

Uzbekistan

Explains the department: "Violators of the law's prohibitions on activities such as proselytizing, importing and disseminating religious literature, and offering private religious instruction are subject to criminal penalties." Harassment, raids, and jail awaited unregistered groups, and especially those which proselytized.

Venezuela

It's not exactly a communist state, but Hugo Chavez appears to be a Fidel Castro-wannabe. Although religious practice was generally respected, warns the department, "religious groups, like others that criticized the government, were subject to harassment and intimidation."

Vietnam

The status of religious liberty has improved some with recognition of several religions and Protestant denominations. Nevertheless, the report says: "significant problems remained with the implementation of the legal framework on religion, especially at the provincial and village levels."

And, no surprise, "Religious groups encountered the greatest restrictions when they engaged in activities the government perceived as a challenge to its rule or to the authority of the Communist Party."

Religious liberty long has been a stepchild of U.S. foreign policy. Yet religious liberty is the proverbial canary in the mine for human rights. Governments which will not protect freedom of conscience in this most basic way are unlikely to respect political

or civil liberties.

Although promoting religious freedom cannot be a central objective of most nations' foreign policy, governments of free nations should help advance religious liberty. Even as they engage the world as it is, free societies can stand on the side of human rights, including religious liberty.

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