

International Religious Freedom: Strategic National Interest and Foreign Policy Priority

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One's freedom to believe as he or she chooses and to manifest those beliefs is a constitutional right in the United States that is often taken for granted. Not only do we enjoy these freedoms as we adhere to or reject worldviews and religions as we choose; we also enjoy the robust civil society, peaceful political transitions, and economic prosperity that would not be possible were this fundamental freedom not soundly protected in the United States.

Many of those who serve in diplomatic missions around the world witness the painful ramifications of the policies and practices of governments that neglect or willfully restrict religious freedom. Political instability, extremist ideology, sectarian violence, and even international terrorism—all direct threats to US interests around the world—grow from societies that fail to provide equal protection to all their citizens and that allow sectarian differences to inhibit cooperative efforts to solve shared problems. This is why Secretary Clinton, in her July 30 speech at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, stated that “religious freedom is a cherished constitutional value, a strategic national interest, and a foreign policy priority” of the United States.

However, this is not exclusively an American idea or commitment. The international community came together in 1948 to unanimously adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18 of which enshrines the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. It is on this basis that the US government seeks to advance religious freedom around the world. Article 18 is the standard against which the US Department of State assesses religious freedom in 199 countries and territories in our annual “International Religious Freedom Report (IRF Report).”

The most recent IRF Report was released July 30 and assesses the events of 2011, a year that brought both new opportunities and enormous challenges. I regret to report that, despite some progress, the overall state of religious freedom in the world is sliding backward. We saw people reaching for greater dignity and freedom and demanding that their governments institutionalize democratic reform. However, members of faith communities around the world have long been under pressure report that that pressure is growing. More than a billion people live under governments that systematically suppress religious freedom, and, as the 2011 IRF Report documents, various forms of hate speech are on the rise. For example, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims, unregistered Christian churches, and Falun Gong adherents in China face stifling regulation, government pressure to abandon certain religious loyalties, and even outright bans on certain religious organizations. More than 70 countries in 2011 reported significant acts of anti-Semitism, such as violence directed toward Jewish individuals and communities. The incidence of such acts is increasing worldwide.

The situation in Pakistan exemplifies what can happen if a government does not sufficiently protect religious freedom. Hundreds of Pakistani citizens, both Muslim and non-Muslim, have been convicted of violating blasphemy laws and authorities rarely investigate or prosecute perpetrators of extremist attacks. This sends a clear message that sectarian violence will not be punished. In 2011, the Governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, and the Minister of Minority Affairs, Shahbaz Bhatti, were assassinated simply for criticizing Pakistan's blasphemy laws in public and promoting greater tolerance and understanding. Similarly in Egypt in 2011, an environment of impunity led to the death of 94—mostly Copts—due to sectarian violence at the hand of both government and societal perpetrators before and after the fall of Mubarak. Fast-forward to July 27, 2012, when we saw 120 Christian families driven from their homes and the death of a young Muslim man in Dahshour, Egypt as sectarian clashes erupted following a laundry accident.

Many countries, especially in Central Asia, restrict religious freedom under the guise of public safety and countering violent extremism. Those arrested on charges of extremism—including devout Muslims with no ties to violent extremism—are often subject to torture, beatings, and harsh prison conditions. The Parental Responsibility Law in Tajikistan bans children from participation in religious communities, and laws in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan severely restrict organizations' abilities to print, import, or distribute religious literature. Kazakhstan introduced a law requiring religious groups to re-register or face sanctions, including heavy fines and jail time, and also requires religious groups to submit their materials to the state for review and approval. The State Department's "2011 Country Reports on Terrorism" states that "commentators linked negative reaction to the new amendments to [Kazakhstan's] law on religion with violent acts committed in October and November." This demonstrates that rather than combating violent extremism, restrictions on religious freedom can actually have the opposite effect.

In a number of countries, individuals continue to face harassment and arrest simply for what they believe. In Iran, Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani faces the threat of execution for following his Christian faith, and the government continues to detain more than 100 Baha'i, including the seven Baha'i leaders who were convicted of "espionage for Israel," "insulting religious sanctities," and "propaganda against the system." New technologies have given repressive governments additional tools for cracking down on religious expression, as evidenced by the 2012 case of a young Saudi Muslim, Hamza Kashgari, who was arrested for questioning his faith on Twitter and remains in jail without charge.

These examples demonstrate Deputy National Security Advisor Denis McDonough's recent observation that "a lack of religious freedom weakens social cohesion and alienates citizens from their government, fomenting internal unrest, breeding extremism, and inhibiting national unity and progress." In many places around the world today, those who do not think or believe as their governments demand find themselves in a precarious position. In Burma, the government took steps toward political reform late in 2011; however, it continued to monitor the meetings and activities of some organizations, including religious organizations, and required religious groups to seek permission from authorities before holding any large public events. Systematic discrimination and harassment—particularly

against Christians and Muslims—are contributing factors to ethnic and religious tensions that have recently erupted into widespread violence.

But this glum assessment is not the entire story. Progress can be incremental and subtle, while violations of religious freedom are often sudden and dramatic, capturing the attention of the world. Sometimes it is easier to focus on the egregiously bad than the quietly good. Take for example Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye, who have overcome religious stereotypes, prejudice, and violence to come together for a common goal of peace. They have successfully taken their important message of mutual respect, peace, and cooperation beyond their home country of Nigeria. We are seeing similar courage and determination around the world as people struggle in the streets and on the Internet to claim their rightful place in society and as contributors in their economies. These are the same people who stand up every day against repression to demand their rights and the rights of others. These are the same people who must participate in the political process to shape the future of their countries. The United States government will continue to support these voices, and push back on attempts to restrict religious freedom, both publicly and privately.

The Obama administration considers religious freedom a strategic national interest and has made it as a diplomatic priority. We raise these issues at the highest levels in international settings and include them in our regular discussions with governments around the world, such as in human rights strategic bilateral dialogues. I personally have discussed religious freedom and necessary reforms, both domestically and abroad, with government officials and members of civil society in numerous countries, and Secretary Clinton, our ambassadors, the Assistant Secretary for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, and other senior officials continue to do so as well.

The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 empowers the President and Secretary of State to designate countries that perpetrate “systematic, ongoing, egregious” violations of religious freedom as Countries of Particular Concern (CPCs). Currently there are eight CPCs: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Uzbekistan. CPCs can be designated at any time, and we continue to monitor the state of religious freedom in all countries.

When appropriate, we use other tools; with Iran, we have imposed financial sanctions and travel bans on high-level Iranian officials and entities, including Iran’s Intelligence Ministry, for serious human rights abuses, including the mistreatment of people who belong to religious minorities.

Together with governments, international organizations, and civil society, this administration has also worked to pass and implement UN Human Rights Council Resolution 16/18, which outlines constructive actions to promote respect for people of different religions. It calls upon states to employ practical government and civil society approaches to protect citizens and their right to free expression while promoting respect for religious differences. In December 2011, we hosted the first expert-level meeting on implementing Resolution 16/18; the first in a series of such meetings focused on sharing

best practices. Representatives from 26 countries and four international organizations participated and we look forward to the second implementation meeting later this year.

In addition to diplomatic and policy approaches, the US government uses various types of programming to advance religious freedom. The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor currently manages approximately \$10 million of foreign assistance funds that, among other things, provide conflict mitigation training to local civil society organizations and we undertake community development projects with faith-based community organizations that promote religious tolerance.

It is important for us to partner with civil society as well as with governments in order to help religious freedom and democracy flourish around the world. We are using the Secretary's Strategic Dialogue with Civil Society to engage new voices and deliver our message to a broad spectrum of actors and build new relationships. We are establishing partnerships with groups and individuals around the globe and are using our convening power to bring together various groups to advance human rights around the world. One such initiative, the "2012 Hours Against Hate Campaign," partners the Department of State with countless members of civil society, and the initiative was adopted as a tolerance campaign by the London Olympic and Paralympic Games Organizing Committee to promote respect regardless of religion, culture, gender, disability or sexual orientation. Using social media, this campaign mobilizes young people to volunteer time to work against intolerance and hate. These are just some of the initiatives this administration has taken to promote religious freedom around the world.

As Secretary Clinton eloquently stated, "Religious freedom is one of those safety valves. It lets people have a say over important aspects of their lives, join their societies fully, and channel their frustrations into constructive outlets. When governments clamp down on religious freedom, they close those safety valves. The result can be humiliation, discontent, despair that has nowhere to go—a recipe for conflict and extremism."

The United States will continue to stand by those who struggle for democracy and human rights because these principles represent American values and our interests. Religious freedom is a fundamental human right that affects the security and stability of the United States of America. As President Obama has stated, this "administration continues to stand with all who are denied the ability to choose, express, or live their faith freely, and we remain dedicated to protecting this universal human right and the vital role it plays in ensuring peace and stability for all nations." We will use all available diplomatic tools to encourage governments in the right direction and to partner with civil society to do the same. Through our words and actions, we stand by these principles every day.