



Promoting Religious Freedom of Minorities

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Committee: Human Rights Council (HRC)

Topic: Promoting religious freedom of minorities

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Introduction:

Religious intolerance, though a longstanding issue, has witnessed a notable surge in recent years. Acknowledged as a fundamental human right, the advocacy for freedom of religion is believed to foster societal stability, mitigate terror and violence, increase national security, and stimulate economic prosperity.

The fundamental issue connects to the effectiveness of international human rights bodies such as the European Convention of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in ensuring universal religious freedom of minorities. Across numerous nations, religious minorities endure persecution, discrimination, and violence. Despite being enshrined in various national constitutions and as international law, challenges persist worldwide, as minorities frequently encounter violence and discrimination. This research report endeavors to offer a comprehensive examination and guideline for addressing this pressing issue.

Definition of key terms:

Human rights council: The body within the United Nations which is responsible for protecting human rights and addressing and recommending situations of human rights violations to remedy them.

Freedom of religion: Guarantees the right to think, express, and act upon one's faith. "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." (Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

Minorities: A group of persons which constitutes less than half of a state's population, whose members share characteristics that prove them to be distinct in terms of linguistics, religion, or ethnicity and who aim for a sense of solidarity towards the preservation of their beliefs, culture, language, or religion

Human rights: The fundamental rights and freedoms belonging to everyone regardless of nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, race, gender, or any other status.

Discrimination: The prejudiced outlook or distinction of persons based on factors such as nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, race, gender, sexual origin, or any other status.

Human rights violations: When a government or state fails in respecting, protecting, and fulfilling the human rights. A government or state may not interfere with an individual's human rights. A government or state must ensure that one's human rights are not violated by others such as other persons, businesses, or political groups. A government or state must take measures to realize the human rights of each individual.

Religious minority: A group of persons bound together by religious characteristics such as religious practices and shared beliefs.

International advocacy: Focuses on a global audience and refers to efforts made by governments, organizations, and individuals involved in promoting and protecting human rights on a global scale. Such efforts include raising awareness, lobbying governments, and creating support for policies and initiatives which advance the rights of religious minorities while reducing religious discrimination.

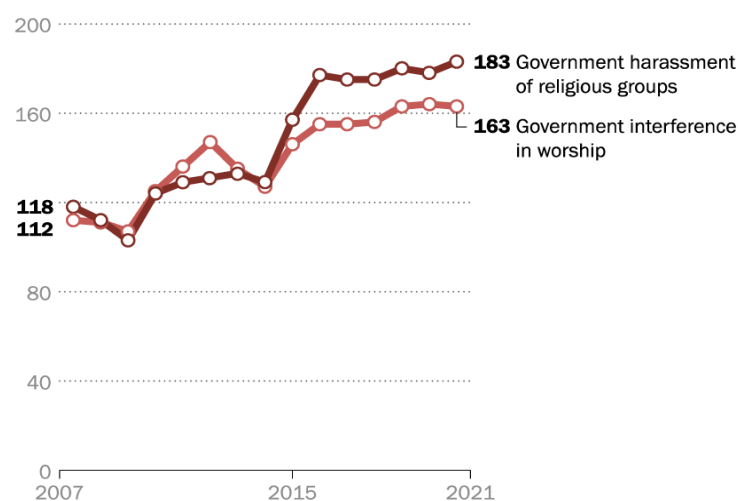
Background information:

The practice of religious freedom for minorities is a crucial human rights issue with significant implications for global peace, stability, and social harmony. Across the world, individuals and communities belonging to religious minorities often face discrimination, harassment, and violence due to their beliefs. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, recognizes the right to freedom of religion or belief as a fundamental human right for all individuals, regardless of their religious practices.

Despite international legal frameworks and commitments to maintain religious freedom, violations against religious minorities remain in many parts of the world. According to the Pew Research Centre's report on global religious restrictions, released in 2021, religious minorities face legal and social restrictions in over 180 countries, as shown in the graph in figure 1. These restrictions range from limitations on religious practices and expressions to persecution, including violence and imprisonment.

Since 2007, number of countries where governments have harassed religious groups or interfered in worship has increased

Number of countries and territories where there was ____ in 2021



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of external data. Refer to the Methodology for details.
 "Globally, Government Restrictions on Religion Reached Peak Levels in 2021, While Social Hostilities Went Down"

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Figure 1: Graph showing growth in number of countries where religious groups were harassed from 2007-2021 (Pew Research Center, 2021)

The situation is particularly severe for certain religious minority groups, such as Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and others, who face targeted discrimination and violence based on their faith. For example, the persecution of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, the oppression of Uyghur Muslims in China, and the targeting of Christians in Nigeria are just a few examples of the challenges faced by religious minorities worldwide.

Several factors contribute to the violation of religious freedom for minorities globally. These include political regimes that aim to control or suppress (certain)

religious practices, social and cultural tensions fueled by religious intolerance, extremist ideologies that target religious minorities, and geopolitical conflicts that worsen religious tensions.

Efforts to promote religious freedom for minorities require a multifaceted approach, involving legal reforms, education, interfaith dialogue, and international cooperation. Organizations such as the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, the Pew Research Center, and Human Rights Watch play a crucial role in monitoring religious freedom violations, conducting research, and advocating for policy changes to protect the rights of religious minorities. Furthermore, initiatives such as the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, hosted by the United States Department of State, bring together government officials, civil society representatives, and religious leaders from around the world to address challenges and share the best practices in promoting religious freedom.

Timeline:

- **1948:** The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is adopted by the United Nations General Assembly, affirming the right to freedom of religion or belief for all persons, including members of religious minorities.
- **1966:** The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) is adopted by the United Nations, which includes clauses of protecting freedom of religion or belief.
- **1978:** The United States passes the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), which seeks to promote religious freedom as a foreign policy priority and establishes the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) to closely monitor and report on religious freedom violations worldwide.
- **1998:** The European Court of Human Rights issues its landmark decision in the case of *Kokkinakis v. Greece*, declaring that religious freedom includes the right to manifest one's religion or belief in worship, practice, and teaching.
- **2006:** The United Nations Human Rights Council adopts the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion

or Belief, restating the need of promoting and protecting freedom of religion for all persons, including members of religious minorities.

- **2011:** The Arab Spring uprisings begin, leading to political disruption and social change in several countries across the Middle East and North Africa. These events bring light to issues of religious freedom and minority rights in the region.
- **2014:** The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) leads to widespread harassment and violence against religious minorities in Syria and Iraq, including Christians, Yazidis, and others. The international community condemns these atrocities and takes action to support affected communities.
- **2019:** The United States hosts the Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom, bringing together government officials, civil society leaders, and religious representatives to discuss strategies to promote religious freedom.

Stakeholders:

India: The First Global Minority Report considered data about the religious freedom of minorities in 110 countries. The reports showed that India was the most inclusive in terms of religious minorities. The country has 6 recognized religious minorities from which Christians and Muslims are the largest; 27.6 million Christians and 172.2 million Muslims. In India, the proportion of the minorities has been on a continuous rise whilst its neighboring nations (Bangladesh and Pakistan) have a continuously decreasing minority.

China: The government of China contains four categories of religious groups: unregistered groups; feudal superstitions; cults; and officially sanctioned religions., with five nationally recognized and major religions: Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism, and Roman Catholicism. Within these, only in registered venues is religious practice legal, and religious and personnel organizations must be registered. The religious demographic profile of China is:

- Folk religion (Taoism, Confucianism); 21.9%
- Buddhist; 18.2%
- Christian; 5.1%

- Muslim; 1.8%
- Unaffiliated; 52.2%
- Others

China officially is an atheist state (promoting Confucian), and the government of China has nationalized all religions which are not labelled by the Chinese government as indigenous. In the Chinese Constitution, foreign domination of religion is prohibited (Article 36), which can impact Islam and Christianity as Christianity specifically is forbidden from carrying out any activities regarding converting others. The religious minorities of Beijing and Shanghai felt less religiously discriminated than those in Xinjiang, especially Uyghur Muslims, having been separated from family and kept in detention camps.

Additionally, while the Chinese Constitution expressly mentions that persons in China may not be forced to follow any religion, their model of treating religious minorities uses an oppressive approach, going against its Constitution.

Turkey: Turkey has various religious and ethnic minorities such as: Armenian, Alevism, Assyrian, Greek, Christianity, Islam (Sunni), and Judaism. 99% of the population is Muslim with 80% being Sunni. Turkey accepts only three non-Muslim groups as the minority which include Armenians, Rum Orthodox Christians (Greeks), and Jews. Other ethnic minorities and non-Muslim groups are not recognized.

The Constitution of Turkey ensures that the nation remains non-religious through Articles 14 and 24; Article 24 states that everyone has the freedom of conscience, religious belief, and conviction, and none shall be compelled to worship, take part in religious ceremonies, or reveal his religious beliefs and convictions.

Additionally, minority rights are protected by Articles 37-45 of the Treaty of 1923. Based on this treaty, only non-Muslim communities are recognized as minorities and have the right to use their own language, the right of political and civic equality, the right to establish religious, educational, and social welfare institutions, and the right to freedom of religion, travel, and migration.

EU countries: After 2015 and the creation of the Sustainable Development Goals, and evaluation led to an economic framework where Europe was unable to minimize its unintended consequences of religious policies. By analyzing the policies of the EU, there are multiple provisions in place to maintain the right of minorities and prevent violations of their human rights. Some such examples include education of minorities in their language, funding for their betterment, and close monitoring to notice any discrimination.

These countries also follow international laws written in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The EU additionally recognizes persons who choose to not follow any religion. Moreover, the EU raises awareness and promotes this human right through various initiatives.

A survey conducted in 2018 within the EU showed that 48% of the population in the EU felt that discrimination against persons based on religion occurred frequently.

Greece: The largest minority in Greece is Muslims, which includes:

- Roma; 15%
- Pomaks or Slavic-speaking; 35%
- Muslims of Turkish origin; 50%

While Macedonians and Albanians live in Greece, they have not been provided with the minority status, exhibiting systematic discrimination against minorities.

Germany: Germany only officially recognizes four minorities: Danes; Frisians; German Sinti; Roma and Sorbs. From the German state, these official national minorities receive funding, special protection, and can use their language in law, education, and administration wherever they traditionally live. Religious minorities, specifically Islam, struggle with having benefits under PLC provisions.

Poland: In Poland, the Roman Catholic Church is the significant religion (92.9% citizens according to the 2015 Census), with the Eastern Orthodox Church and Protestant

Church. The minorities in Poland are defined based on their ethnicity rather than religion.

Religious discrimination nevertheless occurs. Jews and Muslims are two widely targeted religious minorities. For example, in the country 11 of the 15 religious groups have marriages performed which are accepted without registration in a civil office, with the remaining requiring registration if performed under Mariavite and the Old Eastern Orthodox Churches, and Muslim and Karaim faiths.

Sweden: The Swedish state has protected minorities in various ways, such as facilitating revenue collection and granting asylum to Chinese Uyghur Muslims. Moreover, the Swedish prime minister has been vocal about religious persecution and violation of the right to freedom of religion, with the government funding several religious groups. Through the National Minorities and Minorities Languages Act (2010), minorities are given the right to information, protection of culture and language, and the right to participating and influence. Minorities can thus freely practice religion, publicly or privately.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO): NGOs focused on human rights, like the Human Rights Watch, the Minority Rights Group, and Amnesty International, actively advocate for the religious freedom of minorities. Their research, initiatives to raise awareness, advocacy campaigns and communication with governments is crucial to globally promote religious freedom of minorities.

Relevant UN Treaties, Resolutions, and Reports:

Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities, 1992 -

https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Booklet_Minorities_English.pdf

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948 - <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

UN Human Rights Committee (HRC), 1993 -

<https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/hrc/1993/en/13375>

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), 1966 -

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/compass/the-international-covenant-on-civil-and-political-rights#:~:text=This%20Covenant%20was%20adopted%20by,force%20on%2023%20March%201976>.

European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), 1950 -

https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG

Previous attempts to solve the issue:

In 2020, the parliament of Pakistan created the Protection of Minorities Bill, which created several guidelines to protect the rights of religious minorities. Such rights include prohibition of forced conversions of any group, individual, or religious minority, changes in education curriculum to prevent demeaning, humiliating, or spreading hatred against any religious minority. This bill, however, was abolished the following year. The reason stated was because minorities were receiving religious freedom prior to the bill, from other existing laws. Several reasons could stand behind its failure. The parliament of Pakistan could have lacked clear mechanisms for implementation, making it ineffective to implement the clauses stated in the bill. Moreover, inadequate resources, and their inadequate allocation toward implementing the provisions in the bill may have hindered the process of protecting the rights of religious minorities.

The establishment of the National Commission for Minorities (NCM) in 1993 in India was an initiative to promote freedom of religion of minorities. NCM was responsible for protecting the right of religious freedom of minorities, inquire into discrimination complaints, and recommending possible solutions for the welfare of these religious minorities. However, NCM has received much criticism on its effectiveness in promoting and protecting religious freedom of minorities. However, the key reason for its lack of success was the systematic discrimination and minimal substantial reform, as well as problems with mandates not being delivered. This initiative could be successful with greater resources, authority and more independence.

Possible solutions:

1. Encourage educational institutions worldwide such as schools and universities to create mandatory lessons to raise awareness for, and educate individuals on the importance of human rights, specifically the right to freedom of religion in minorities,
2. Protect any places of worship or sites with symbolic meaning to be preserved, protected, and prevented from vandalism and desecration,
3. Institute repercussions against any persons, groups, or organizations who discriminate, harass, and violate against minorities, and their right to freedom of religion,
4. Promote innovation of initiatives which target the collaboration of governments, local communities, and all religious leaders to promote freedom of religion,
5. Emphasize communication among various religious minorities and society to foster mutual acceptance, understanding, and respect.

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